

Between Wind and Water

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Between Wind and Water

by [rexluscus](#)

Summary

England and Spain are at war, and Norrington needs a quick solution to the Jack Sparrow problem. Meanwhile, Jack discovers that the Caribbean he once knew is gone. The deal they make could solve both their troubles, or it might be the worst mistake of their lives. AU after first film.

Notes

This story is AU after the first film (sequels never happened). It's an experiment in dropping POTC characters into an actual historical event: the Battle of Cartagena de Indias in 1741. Most of the non-POTC characters are real people. I did, however, alter history quite a bit. I'll tell you at the end what I changed.

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In which the offer is made

2 September, 1739

James shut his eyes, but they snapped open again. Above him, the tell-tale compass jerked and rolled in its gimbals, in phase with his swinging bunk. He was deeply, dangerously tired, but he'd never learned to sleep during a blow, and this one was going on its fifth day. The seas had increased in the last hour and his stomach flipped with each little tug of the ship's head toward the wind. All around him, timbers groaned. Most of him knew his ship would hold together, but a corner of his mind argued, and kept him awake.

The *Black Pearl* must have been in this storm too—he'd watched her vanish under a black horizon blinking with lightning—but Sparrow's supernatural luck had no doubt borne her out of it days ago. Meanwhile, James and his crew of mere mortals toiled on. In Port Royal, his desk was piling up with reports of Spanish *guarda costas* boarding English ships, and what was he doing? Chasing one little epicene pickpocket who posed no danger to anyone but James himself—not to mention the five hundred hollow-eyed men puking into their hats and working watch and watch without soup or sleep. There was simply no way chasing Sparrow could any longer be considered the act of a rational man.

His eyelids drooped, vision fixed on the compass card dipping and turning. Suddenly the card spun along with his bunk. The ship had yawed, and now it gave a great lee-lurch as the sea struck its quarter. James leapt out of the bunk on the top of the next roll, already scrambling into his breeches.

He pushed through a pack of drenched seamen headed for the wardroom and made for the main deck, lurching forward, holding fast, and lurching again. He reached the top of the ladder just in time to duck as a cold sheet of spray swept the deck. Glossy shapes moved around in the yellow light, the men in their oilskins, and as the wind died for a moment, their thin voices floated above the howl. Suddenly Captain Gillette was at his side.

"The tiller-rope's parted, sir!" he shouted. That explained the yaw that had thrown James from his bunk. "The relieving tackles are holding for now. Groves is seeing to it."

"Damn." James looked up at the wheel spinning free, then at the main topsail, which hadn't flown back yet, at least. He pulled Gillette closer so they could speak without hollering. "Does everything else hold?"

There was a crack, higher than the blast of a gun but nearly as loud, and the foremast gave an agonized groan. The topmast forestay had parted, sending their lone headsail whipping out into the dark where it fluttered off the bow like a ragged spirit. The ship yawed again. With no headsail set, it was impossible to steer, impossible to keep the ship before the wind and out from under the heavy following seas.

"Come up the backstays!" shouted Gillette, his voice nearly lost as the ship crashed down into a trough. "Save that mast, and for God's sake, set the foresail!"

"See to the helm," said James, and rushed forward with a dozen men at his heels.

Barefoot, in nothing but his soaked shirt and smallclothes, James skidded down the gangway. A boy at his side lost his footing and James reached out to gather him up as the ship struck the bottom of the next trough. For a long moment, they could do nothing but push through the water

sweeping the waist, blind and deaf in the roaring flood, and then the deck began to rise, the close-reefed topsail caught the wind again, and the ship turned slowly, inexorably off her course.

"Man the yard!" James shouted. "Cut away those gaskets! Hurry!"

Men swarmed up the foremast and out onto the yard, and James waited, breathless, for the sail to drop. The ship was nearly broadside to the sea now; the next wave would sweep them onto their beam-ends. The foresail came down, and for several thunderous seconds it flapped uselessly in the roaring wind. "Sheet home, sheet home!" James cried, even as his eyes fell on the jammed block that held the weather sheet captive. There was no time for an order. He ran to it and pulled it free, tearing the skin from his hands as it escaped, and at last the foresail bellied out. The ship pivoted, falling off the wind, and slowly righted herself.

James clung to a stanchion and caught his breath as certain doom withdrew.

They fought a long, wet battle to set up a new forestay. James wrapped his hands in strips from his shirt and shouted until he was hoarse. Once the mast was out of danger, he made his way aft. He found Gillette beside the restored helm, hollering his orders to the four seamen wrestling the wheel. Around them, the creaking of the yards and braces had begun to lose its urgency, and the light had grown less ghastly.

"When did you last sleep?" James shouted.

"Two days ago, sir."

"Go below. I'll take the con."

"Are you certain? You look—"

"Go."

Gillette disappeared down the hatchway, and James took his spot beside the wheel, his eyes fixed on the sea chasing them in mountainous swells. His steward brought him a coat, and he shivered in the damp wool as he spoke steadily to the helmsmen keeping the ship before the wind. An hour later, the master relieved him at the con and he staggered below, clumsy with exhaustion, feeling his way toward his cabin with raw, aching hands.

On the ladder, he heard Gillette's raised voice, distinct for just a moment over the din of the complaining ship. James made out the words, "I'll see you hanged!"

Curiosity trumped exhaustion. As he crept toward the wardroom, Gillette's irate voice reached him in fragments. "... Yes, present your case to the Commodore, by all means," it sneered. "Watch your careers turn to ash—I'll make sure of it myself, you blackguards."

"... was just a bit of talk," came Lieutenant Groves's voice, which surprised James. Groves was Gillette's particular friend.

"That kind of talk will get you court-martialed!" Gillette replied.

There was a heavy pause. Then Groves said, "The whole ship's thinking it, I'm just putting words to it. The lower decks all think the Commodore's gone mad."

"The lower decks will follow orders and so will you!" Gillette shouted, and a drop in the wind admitted his voice all over the ship.

James shrank back when footsteps drew near, then the door slammed shut.

Groves was right, of course. It was mad indeed to keep chasing Sparrow. Duty demanded he give it up before men began to die for it. If only he could bring himself to admit defeat.

Three days later, his ship lay in Port Royal Harbor, patiently allowing the dockyard to patch her wounds. Up in his townhouse, James stood in front of his wash basin, naked, sore and stiff. For the first time in weeks, he was alone, and his ears rang in the silence, his skin prickling in the empty space free of other bodies. His drawn curtains had turned his room into a humid cave, and two beads of sweat trickled down his ribs. The wash basin was frosted with a thin gray scum.

In the glass, he saw an unfamiliar face with dark circles under its eyes and a five-day beard. He splashed it, soaped it, and applied the razor to his cheek just beside his ear. There was nothing so pleasurable as warm water and a sharp razor after many days in a blow. He opened his eyes, and the face in the glass looked startled, with its neat rectangle of bare flesh cut from a field of soapy beard. He cut a swath down the opposite cheek.

London wouldn't object if he gave up on Sparrow. They'd probably thank him for it. The shipping interests in Parliament were getting louder, and Sparrow would fade into another frivolous anecdote if James could put the Spanish in their place. He'd be lauded all over the realm. He'd be a hero.

A face was emerging in the glass. A handsome face, a confident face. He craned his neck to draw the blade up over his throat. Sparrow was personally offensive; that had to be why James could not let him go. He'd made a fool of James at least four times, and James saved his most passionate hatred for men who embarrassed him. It was emotional, then, and he was above that.

He splashed his face and looked up. There was James Norrington again—a bit worse for wear, but still the man he'd been before a storm called Sparrow had brought him by the lee. Still the youngest commander-in-chief these waters had ever seen; still a man who served his king before himself. He patted his chin dry.

The parade ground at Fort Charles was crowded with flotsam the storm had washed ashore: warrant officers, lieutenants, Marines, midshipman, clerks. A figure in a tartan coat moved toward him out of the throng. He tried to change direction, but it was too late.

"Commodore!" The man chased after him. "I demand an audience! You have been holding my cargo for six months and I'm this close to writing my friends in the London press to make an example of you!"

James spun around and faced the man, whose name was Margrave. "You've got a lot of nerve coming it high with me," he sneered. "You are a smuggler and a pirate and I'd happily see you hanged. Now get out of my fort or I'll have you removed."

"You twit!" snarled Captain Margrave. "What kind of Englishman are you, taking the Spanish side against English merchants?"

"Merchants!" James laughed. "You are criminals! Mewling your tales of woe about Spanish atrocities when you've all done just as bad or worse. Well, I don't consider it my patriotic duty to accept bribes, sir. You'll get your cargo back when the courts say so—that of it which is deemed legal, anyway."

He went on his way, but his harasser followed. "Norrington the pirate hunter," laughed Margrave. "Bringing law to the Caribbean whether your country wishes it or not. If you're such a man of the

law, care to tell us why Sparrow's still free?"

"Sparrow is nothing compared to—" James bit his tongue. Had he just been about to *defend* Sparrow? "Look to your own house, Margrave. And by the way"—he bared his teeth—"by all means, keep casting aspersions on my loyalty. I have no love of dueling, but I'm in excellent practice with both sword and pistol should you care to test it."

Margrave turned red and stopped, leaving James to walk on.

This was all Ogle's fault. In the six years James had served under him on the West Indies station, he'd never been able to square the middle-aged commodore who humored smugglers with the young captain who'd crushed Black Bart Roberts in '22. Perhaps that was the depressing reality of growing old. When Ogle had been ordered back home, James had inherited an ambiguous world in which England made treaties with Spain it fully expected its subjects to break. In such a world, it seemed pointless to worry about someone as trifling as Sparrow. But James had plans for himself. He could not lug this failure around for the rest of his career.

In his office, his secretary Mr. Sandys was leaving a stack of letters on his desk. "Two from Whitehall," Sandys said, then threw open the shutters and left.

He found the letters from the Admiralty and tore them open. Shortly, his steward hurried in with a pot of coffee, but James didn't touch it. He reread the letters, tapped their edges on the table, then read them again.

On the balcony, with the letters crumpled in his hand, he gazed out upon his little kingdom. Beyond the ships anchored in the roadstead, water bled into sky in a hot blue haze, and as his eyes unfocused in it, shock faded into the beginnings of ideas. The catastrophe contained in those letters might be opportunity in disguise. By the time he sat down to his cold coffee, he almost believed in luck.

"Commodore!" Elizabeth pushed up the brim of her floppy straw hat. "There's tea over there. You'll understand if I don't pour it for you."

"I say," said James, stepping into the garden, "are you quite sure you're supposed to treat it like that?"

"Of course." She set down her knife and fussed with the seedling's pruned boughs, like a governess arranging a little girl's dress. "It won't thrive otherwise."

The little tree shivered in its nudity. Elizabeth gave it a crowning snip and stood back.

"Perfect," said James.

"Sit down." Elizabeth pulled off her heavy gloves as she came over to the table. "Sit. I didn't expect to see you. I thought you'd be down in the harbor."

"I am occasionally capable of delegation," he said, pouring a cup of tea and sitting.

Elizabeth poured her own tea. "Then why do you look like you have business on your mind?"

"I always have business on my mind," he said dryly. "I simply choose most of the time not to speak of it." He endured a few more moments of her glare before saying, "Actually, I have a favor to ask."

"As I thought." Then she blinked. "A favor? You never ask favors of anybody, Commodore. You are a creature of perfect self-sufficiency."

"I do try. But some things fall outside my influence. You see, I need to get in touch with your friend Captain Sparrow."

For once, she ignored the heavy irony he'd loaded onto the word 'captain'. "And what," she said through a frozen smile, "makes you think I could do such a thing?"

His defenses against Elizabeth were formidable by now, but every now and then, he remembered that he was a strange and amusing species to her, not one of her own tribe; that she would never trust him, never want his company the way he wanted hers. No subject had the effect of bringing this into sharper focus than Sparrow.

He looked away. "Mrs. Turner, let us not lie to each other. I know you and your husband keep regular contact with Sparrow. And I assure you that for once, I mean your pet pirate no harm."

"That's...good to hear," she said.

He peered at her; she peered back. "All right," he sighed at last. "Let us *suppose* you had contact with Sparrow. Were this to be true, you could bear him a message that would have positive ramifications for his life and legal status in these waters."

"It...would?"

"It would." He pushed away his tea, frustrated by the blank front she was presenting. "I am changing my policy toward Sparrow—from destruction to assimilation."

Understanding dawned on her face. "A privateer's commission!" Then suspicion returned. "But why?"

"Call it a radical realignment of priorities. My superiors are about to become profoundly uninterested in pirates, except those who fly the colors of Spain." Elizabeth's eyes widened, and he nodded. "War will be declared by the end of the month, and I won't have time to chase Sparrow anymore. However, I think I know a way for everyone to come out ahead. Your father could issue Sparrow a pardon and a letter of marque and reprisal to attack Spanish shipping, at once neutralizing the threat he poses to these colonies and furnishing me with a valuable ally."

Elizabeth smiled. "Are you admitting you need help? From Jack, of all people?"

He shrugged. "My authority in the Caribbean is about to be superseded by a politically appointed admiral who thinks this war is my fault. Any remaining enemies I must either destroy or transform into friends. Sparrow is a trifling enemy, but he could be a good friend were he to direct his energy toward annoying and distressing the Spanish instead of me."

"Annoying and distressing certainly sounds like him. But Jack wouldn't be told what to do. You know how he is—if it's not nailed down, he just can't help himself."

"That," said James coolly, "is his problem. He might bear in mind that although the Spanish are our new favorite enemies, he is no safer from us. These waters will shortly be filled with British warships, all of them very much inclined to shoot first and ask questions later. Someone will take him, probably several someones, bristling with enough guns to sink five *Black Pearls*. This is an offer he cannot rationally refuse, and I will not make it twice."

Elizabeth was chewing her lip. "I suppose that if I were in contact with Jack—which I'm not"—she

glared—"then I might convey this message. If I could."

"Excellent. You have my hypothetical thanks." He picked his tea back up.

"There is one problem," she said. "If Jack wished to come and speak to you, how could he be sure it wasn't a trap?"

"He has my word that just this once, he could leave unmolested. You might, however, also mention that this is a temporary and conditional truce between him and myself alone. Now would be a bad time for him to do something stupid."

"Were I to send him this message, I would make sure that this latter point was most clear."

"You are a wise and clever woman." He did not say it with complete approval.

"And you, Commodore, are a man of hidden depths. Now—if we're done speculating, can you stay a while, or does the harbor require your attention after all?"

"It's my writing desk that requires attention." He looked around at the light dappling through the lime trees, and then back at Elizabeth's radiant face, open and importuning, and stifled the lurch in his chest. None of it was for him. "I'm afraid I cannot linger." He rose. "I have a war to prepare for."

"My compliments to the kitchen," said Jack, swallowing a mouthful of rabbit. He tried to remember his manners, but he hadn't seen a table this magnificent since he'd convinced the Governor of San Juan de Puerto Rico he was the Duke of Calabria. Don Francisco Martinez de Retez, Governor of Portobello, was less of a pushover, but his larder made up for it. "Did I hear you say 'oysters'?"

"They are nearly ready." Don Francisco refilled Jack's wine glass. "I apologize for my hospitality; it was all I could manage at such a late hour. Let me offer you another pepper."

Jack glanced at Don Francisco's glass. Its level never seemed to drop, while Jack's went up and down like a Thames weir-lock. Under the Governor's unassuming Castilian charm was an alert and suspicious mind, and somewhere along the way—probably between the fish pie and the chorizo—Jack had gone from predator to prey. "You're too modest," he smiled, taking an exaggerated sip. "This is a royal feast after what I've been through."

"I'm sure." Don Francisco laid his hand over his heart. "You captains of the treasure fleet are a credit to Spain. I only hope that the storm that swept you from your ship batters the English fleet as well. Even in the peace, we suffered grievously under English pirates, you know, and their navy did nothing to stop them."

"Didn't they?" Jack paused in his chewing. Horrified that he had just considered defending Norrington, he devoured the pepper. "Tricky customers, those English."

"You know much of them? I have never known any, myself..."

"Oh, I've met a few," said Jack. "Savages, mostly. Capable of the most violent turtle."

Don Francisco raised a brow.

"Torture, I mean," said Jack. "Must be the wine. Cape?"

"Canary." Don Francisco studied him. "The commander of our *guarda costas* here at Portobello has told me about English atrocities—"

"Tastes a bit young, don't you think?" Jack turned his glass appraisingly.

"It ought to. Tenerife had a good vintage this year. But our commander..."

Jack smacked his lips. "Remind me of the gentleman's name?"

"Don Francisco de Abaroa. I do wish he were here; he would delight in your heroic survival tale."

Jack nodded sympathetically. He had to avoid Abaroa at all costs. Two years ago, the man had gone to sleep aboard a thirty-two-gun snow and woken in the bottom of a six-oared longboat, and he probably hadn't forgotten.

"So tell me again," said Don Francisco, "how many days since you were tossed from your galleon?"

"Hard to say, really." Jack started in on the beans—white beans with onions, his favorite. "You lose track of time out there, baking in the sun, all dried out like seaweed on a rock. Say"—he disguised another sip as a gulp—"any word on what's become of my fleet?"

"It is extraordinary that you should wash ashore here." Don Francisco clucked. "Why, it must have been hundreds of miles..."

"Oh, that's simple enough," said Jack. "Porpoises."

"Porpoises?"

"Four of them. Very much like people, those creatures, and as swift as horses. Carried me on their backs."

"All four of them?"

"They took turns. So they wouldn't wear themselves out."

"I see." Don Francisco was eyeing Jack's tattered velvet waistcoat. "You must pardon my rudeness, Don Joaquín, but I cannot place your dialect. Where did you say you were from?"

And there he thought he'd been doing a perfect Catalanian accent. "Here and there," he mumbled. "Barcelona, Ferrol...a spell in Cadiz..." He had only the vaguest sense of where these places were, but the more he piled on, the fewer openings for the Governor to ask questions. "So, my fleet? They ought to be nearly here by now."

"I've received no word yet," said Don Francisco. "As you know, a boat is dispatched here when the treasure fleet is on its way so that I may notify my colleague in Panama. Only then does he send his goods across the isthmus to us to be sold." The Governor peered at Jack. "So you see, it is sensitive information, not something I could give out to just anyone."

Jack made his eyes big and moist. "But I'm not just anyone! Please, I must know what's become of my ship."

The Governor patted Jack's knee. "I'm sure I'd have heard by now if any of the galleons had been lost. Don't worry yourself; have more wine."

This was going nowhere. He might as well just go up the river to Venta Cruz with a few armed

men and wait for the mule-trains from Panama to trundle by. But that could take weeks, and if he went inland to seize the treasure from Panama, he'd miss out on the galleons from Spain. The whole point was to capture both. The annual Spanish treasure fleet was a dance of many complex steps, and if a pirate wanted to cut in, he had to watch his feet. The most opportune moment was right before Portobello's legendary fair, when for forty days, New World treasure was traded for Old. But Jack needed to know the whens and the wheres if he was to get a piece of it.

Don Francisco was smiling blandly, sipping like a hummingbird from his ever-full glass. He didn't look clever enough to lie, yet Jack was still playing a defensive game. Did the man even know where those galleons were?

At this point, there was really only one way to find out.

Don Francisco jumped and knocked over his glass when he saw the pistol. Jack smiled reassuringly. "Just tell me where those ships are and no one loses an eye."

"Why, you little *snake*," the Governor said petulantly, mopping the wine off his waistcoat. "Porpoises, for God's sake...I never heard such a tremendous load of—"

"I can't make any promises if you don't start talking," said Jack, waving the gun.

"I haven't the faintest idea where they are," said Don Francisco. "I've received no word at all."

Jack picked up his wine glass and fixed the Governor with a hard look. "Spaniards in the New World make their own wine," he said softly. "They don't wait for Old Spain to send it. Canary in my glass means somebody visited recently. And this time of year, ports are closed to all but the king's vessels, lest news of the fleet get round. As you know." He leaned across the table and touched the barrel of the gun to the dark patch on the Governor's waistcoat. "Tell me which islands the fleet will touch at and when, and your servants will only have the wine to worry about."

Don Francisco's chin trembled as he watched the gun barrel. "The courier arrived only in these last few days. The fleet touched at Grand Canary a month ago. That is all I know."

"Let's see—" Jack sat back. "If you figure a month for them to waddle here from the Canaries, they should be landing at the French Antilles any day now."

"I suppose," said Don Francisco quietly.

Jack had obviously worn out his welcome. He'd already planned his bolt route through the kitchen so he didn't need to worry about the armed men outside. He finished his beans, drained his wine, wiped his whiskers, belched, and stood.

"Governor," he said with a low bow, "I am greatly in your debt, and I beg you not to take this personally." With the butt of his pistol, he knocked the terrified man on the head. As he arranged the limp body in the chair, he noticed a signet ring on the Governor's hand and snatched it, more out of habit than with any purpose. He dropped it into his spacious coat pocket to join the pieces of eight he'd nicked, and ran.

The jungle embraced him, and he trekked up the coast in the dark, leaving a trail of oyster shells. The question was where to go next. His buccaneer forebears had simply lain to windward of the islands where the treasure fleet made landfall, but his *Pearl* alone wasn't strong enough for nine armed galleons, and he still had his heart set on the money from Panama.

Logic told him that there was no way to take both, but a deep part of him believed he could always have both. He could round up the old crowd—Benedict Booth and his painted tub of a ship were

still around, and Norrington hadn't hung Castor Kennedy yet. Even Deadwater Dan might be worth scraping off the street, as long as they had a few days to dry him out. Jack hated sharing, but drunk pirates were easy enough to talk out of their money.

The sky behind Isla Grande was rose-pink by the time he rowed out to his ship. He'd go to Tortuga first. In addition to friends, he had a modest intelligence network there. Of all treasures, information was the most valuable, for it alone could generate more. Or so he told himself when his pockets were empty.

16 September, 1739

James had not joined the Navy to do paperwork. He'd gone to sea for the intensity of experience, the salt and the stars and the nausea. In port, reviewing logbooks and accounts, he mourned it. But there were trade-offs. If he'd spent his whole life at sea, he would have missed out on one of his life's great pleasures: angry letters to London.

He began one in his head as he left his house on High Street and walked up the sandy hill to Fort Charles, where the sky was streaked with broken clouds fading in the gold dawn. The humid quiet was filled with the knock of hammers in the harbor, where the men working on the careening wharf and capstan-house were getting in a few hours before the noonday heat descended. That the Naval Board had not paid them since July was one of the catalogue of grievances going into the letter. He suspected there was a file at the Navy Office marked "Norrington" into which they dropped his correspondence, held squeamishly between thumb and forefinger. He rather hoped there was.

At the fort entrance loitered Groves, paging slowly through a muster-book as though examining it for codes. James nodded to his hasty "Good morning, sir," and said, "Have you seen Mr. Sandys?"

"He was headed to the agent-victualer's office when I saw him, sir."

"Send someone to fetch him. Tell him to clear his schedule. I owe the Navy Board a large piece of my mind and the home convoy leaves tomorrow."

He left Groves and his muster-book behind and passed onto the parade ground, still dreaming of his letter. Captain Berkeley of the *Windsor* stood near the guard house, arguing loudly with the storehouse attendant.

"What the devil are you still doing here?" James barked, striding over. "You're supposed to be halfway to the Caracas by now."

"I quite agree," said Berkeley angrily. "As I was explaining to this gentleman, I am still waiting on my provisions, my water and my ordnance stores, and nobody in Port Royal can spare me a boat to send for them."

James sighed. "Find the master-attendant. Tell him Commodore Norrington insists he spare as many boats as you need, immediately. If the Admiral arrives and finds no one watching that coast, we shall all answer for it."

"Yes, sir."

He continued on his way. Up the stairs of the north bastion, he came to a closed door, where he waved over a soldier with a ring of keys. They opened the door to reveal a grumpy Spaniard slouched in a chair by the barred window.

"Captain Elizagaray," James sighed, folding his hands behind his back. In Spanish, he asked, "How fares your eminence?"

"My name sounds like shit in your mouth," sneered the man. "You speak Spanish like a peasant."

"Then it's a good thing I won't be appearing at court anytime soon," James replied. "You've obviously worked hard to wash your own origins out of your mouth, Don Pedro, so let's not trade barbs about gentility, shall we? Now, is there anything I can do to make your grace more comfortable?"

"You could find me a decent chess partner." Don Pedro smoldered, pride still smarting. "Isn't there a single educated man among you?"

James smiled frostily. "Most of us spent our formative years learning to sail and fight, not reciting declensions or reading about the sex lives of pagan gods. Anything else?"

"I wouldn't turn away another bottle of that Montilla wine with dinner," the man muttered.

"You mean the Montilla we seized from your ship?" James chuckled. "Of course, Don Pedro. What's ours is yours again. Now"—he twirled the keys on his finger—"let me remind you how you can regain your freedom."

"For the last time, I will not betray my country!" The Spaniard spat on the floor. "I'll never tell you where those treasure galleons are. Go ahead and torture me if you like!"

"Spare me the histrionics," James sighed. "I save torture for spies—of which you are obviously not one. Spies are usually clever and subtle."

"Oh yes," Don Pedro cried, "insult me all you like. You'll never torment me into speaking against my sovereign king!"

"If I'd wanted to torment you, I wouldn't let you sit here drinking all my wine," James said, and turned to go.

"The only good wine you have on this rock is what you stole from us!" the Spaniard shouted as James shut the door.

He hurried across the parade ground toward the east side, looking over his shoulder. He was about due for a confrontation with Port Royal's Naval Officer, which happened every week like clockwork. He reached his office, shut himself in, threw open the shutters and shed his hat and coat.

From his balcony, Port Royal didn't look like it was at war, but war was full of delays. If one looked closely, one could see the signs. The shipyard was bedlam, doing its best to operate while under construction. Men and rafts crowded the unfinished end of the careening wharf where bare pilings marched out into deeper water, while the *Falmouth* stooped over the finished end, hove down with her masts nearly sideways. Gouts of white smoke bloomed off her sides where men were breaming the weeds and barnacles off her hull. The smell of burning pitch and sulfur drifted into the room.

Mr. Sandys had been through recently, because new papers had been added to the stacks tiling James's desk. A hydrographic survey from Captain Stapleton; a plan and elevation of a new battery for the windward side of the peninsula; an enormous stack of naval store accounts; a letter from the Ordnance Board accusing James of "subversive shenanigans." James read this last item with relish, already composing his reply.

Just as he was about to pick up the accounts, there was a knock at the door.

"Sandys?" he called. "Get in here, for heaven's sake."

The door burst open. "This cannot continue, Commodore!" cried the Naval Officer, striding over to James's desk. "You are running up a tab the Navy Board shall refuse to settle. I can only make so many excuses. You're a damned profligate!"

"What I am is in a hurry," James said, leaning back in his chair. "Admiral Vernon will be here in less than a month. If we can't keep our own ships repaired on schedule, what are we going to do with a whole battle squadron? I trust you shall tell their lordships as much. Now, good day."

"Norrington, this is unacceptable, I—"

"Out!" James rubbed his temple.

Miraculously, the man obeyed.

James leaned on his elbows and rubbed his eyes, listening to the sounds of construction in the harbor. The Admiral. What would he find when he arrived? A tiny port with half-finished refit facilities and no stores, nor certainly any progress against the Spanish. And who would the Admiral hold accountable for this state of affairs? There wasn't enough time or money, especially if James's ships kept crawling home without Spanish prizes.

After a minute, there was another knock on the door.

"That had better be Sandys!" James shouted.

The door opened and Lieutenant Groves put his head inside.

"What is it?" James looked up at him. "I have a stack of accounts here that makes the *Principia Mathematica* look like a grocer's list. Well?"

"Sir, there's someone here to see you."

"Unless they're Sandys, tell them to come back later." James picked up the accounts. They weren't the ones he needed for his letter. He tossed them back down.

"Sir, it's a Frenchman," said Groves.

"I don't care if it's a Spanish Infanta. If Sandys is not here with this month's construction expenditures in the next ten minutes, there's going to be trouble." Groves didn't move. James sighed. "What's his name? What does he want?"

"He says his name is Cassini de Thury, and that he is working on the problem of the longitude. He wants a safe conduct pass to measure magnetic variation in the waters off Jamaica."

"Safe conduct?" James frowned. "That's a matter for the foreign office, not me."

"He doesn't look like he's going to go away. Perhaps you could explain the proper bureaucratic process to him, sir."

"Fine, fine, send him in. And find Sandys!"

Groves slipped out, and after a moment, the door flew open and in strutted a man in a velvet boot-sleeved coat and an explosion of snowy ringlet curls. His face, beard and mustache were all

powdered, hair and flesh alike caked with a waxy, necrotic paste. There was a livid beauty mark under his left eye.

James leapt to his feet. "You look ridiculous," he hissed. "Shut the door!"

Sparrow kicked the door shut with one red heel. "You don't think your dim lieutenant suspected me, do you?"

"He was probably just being polite," James said through his teeth. "Now sit down and—I can't talk to you when you're wearing that ludicrous thing."

"It's all the rage in Paris." Sparrow didn't lift a finger toward the extravagant headwear. "I'm the very picture of a young vicomte about town."

"Which is odd, since you're posing as a scientist." James sat. "Well—it's nice to see you've obviously robbed the French recently. Now, to business. I take it you received my message."

"I did, an' I promised not to say how."

James thinned his lips. "You two are a matched pair."

"So I've always said. Now, the way I understand it, you want to give me something valuable in exchange for something valuable, which is how it usually works. I see the value of what you're giving me. What I'm asked to tender is a bit more vague. Long experience tells me you have more conditions hidden up your sleeve."

"My sleeves aren't the suspicious ones here," James muttered, eying Sparrow's roomy cuffs. "All I'm asking is that you limit your depredations to Spanish ships. If you take an English ship or otherwise molest and assail British subjects, you revert to your status as public enemy and I hunt you down, this time with twice the forces I had at my disposal before."

Sparrow trailed a hand over the edge of the desk, and James kept track of the items nearby. Sparrow poked a dirty finger at the inkstand. "I'd also have to give you a piece of it, wouldn't I?"

"Well, yes."

"An' wait around for some prize-court to drop a few groats into me 'umbly outstretched palm."

"Look," said James, exasperated, "the life of a privateer involves a bit more administrative hassle than that of a pirate, but it's time to grow up, Sparrow. I don't know if you noticed, but the age of true piracy is over." He smiled. "Your kind has given way to me, I'm afraid."

"Well then," Sparrow grinned, "you must be mighty hacked off about this admiral comin' to take your place."

James's smile vanished. "That's none of your business." He laced his fingers. "Like I said, your days are numbered, and when the squadron from England arrives, you will vanish without even a memory to mark your passing."

Sparrow smiled at that. Then he stroked his beard with the head of his cane, parting it into waxy clumps. "Elizabeth said you mean to save your reputation—to 'assimilate' me, as you put it. Which, clever move, my respects. But if, as you claim, your reinforcements will forthwith render me obsolete, why bother? Why give me a way out on the very eve of your victory?"

James saw no particular downside to being honest. "Because," he said, "you were mine to catch,

not theirs."

Sparrow threw his head back, white curls flying, and laughed. "If I weren't so intelligent," he said, still chuckling, "I'd believe you. Your fleet can give the Spanish all the hell they need. Tell me what you really need Captain Jack Sparrow for."

James sighed. "Very well. Do you know what *azogue* is?"

"Of course. Slippery stuff, looks like metal, gives you a rash."

"Don't be obtuse. As a man who's deeply interested in precious metals, you know exactly what quicksilver is for. The Spanish use it to extract silver from the ore they mine in Peru. Every year in Cadiz, they put a vast quantity of it aboard a fleet of galleons and send it here, to the Spanish Main. Once those galleons have disembarked their cargo, they load up with other valuables, including prodigious amounts of bullion and specie—are you listening?"

"Sorry. Listening now. Specie?"

"Money, Sparrow, money."

"I know what bloody specie is." Sparrow picked his teeth with the pin of a brooch that could have sustained an Italian principality for a year. "The only specie I'm interested in is the kind that is potentially mine."

"I'm getting there." James wrinkled his nose at Sparrow's display of hygiene. "The Spanish have a dangerous habit of concentrating their wealth, especially all the way out here where it is vulnerable to the likes of us. If you can help me locate that treasure fleet, then I can assure you a portion of the money that is at this very moment making its way from Panama to Portobello, where it will be traded for the cargo on those ships." He leaned back and let himself dream. "If I were to take that money and those ships, it would be an economic blow to Spain they would need years to recover from. I want those ships, and I want what is destined for them, and if we work together we stand a good chance of securing both."

Sparrow put up his feet. "You know, it occurs to me, Norrington, that you are a natural pirate. Have you ever considered—"

"There is a crucial difference between myself and a pirate," snapped James, leaning across his desk and knocking Sparrow's feet away. "I want these things for my country. A pirate wants them for himself."

Sparrow put his feet back up. "What you want is to snatch up those ships for yourself before that admiral can steal your glory."

James pursed his lips. "So what if I do?"

Sparrow took his feet off the desk and sat up. "If I want that swag, I don't need you to get it, Norrington. Tell me one good reason, other than this vague and rather biblical threat of death you hold over me, why I should settle for one piece of the pie when I could have the whole bloody thing?"

"Because you aren't that good," snarled James. "You think you're special, Sparrow, but true buccaneering died with Bartholomew Roberts and Hector Barbossa. You are just a common thief."

"Then why haven't you caught me yet?"

"The ability to run away does not make you a good pirate."

"Then why do you need my help?"

"Because to catch these galleons, I require something I do not possess: dishonesty."

"Well, then," Sparrow grinned, showing a glint of gold, "if that's all it is—see you at the finish line, Commodore."

James started forward. "That's it, then? You're throwing away the chance of a pardon and a significant amount of honestly made cash just because I won't let you have it all?"

"Aye, pretty much." Sparrow stood and copped a grotesque bow, holding back the ringlets that flopped onto his shoe buckles. "A pleasure as always. Give me regards to the ex-future-Mrs. Commodore and her bonny swain."

"Very well," James said softly. "Next time we meet, I shall show no mercy. Though in all likelihood, it won't even be me who finds you."

"I do so hope it's you," said Sparrow with a sinister smile. "Wouldn't be right, gettin' caught by some starched ninny who don't know me from Adam. As opposed to one who does."

James swallowed. "Out of curiosity," he said, leaning back, "when you came in here knowing you would refuse my offer, how were you planning on getting out?"

Sparrow flipped aside an enormous cuff to reveal an ivory-handled pistol. "Bit of insurance," he smiled.

"There's no need," said James. "We'll have plenty of opportunity next time."

"You'll forgive me if I don't look forward to it." Sparrow edged over to the door, opened it a crack, and slipped out.

James released a sigh. He had the most peculiar feeling, as though something—an age, an idea, a sheltered belief—had come to an end.

There was a knock, and the door opened. "You needed me, sir?" asked Mr. Sandys.

In which the Caribbean grows a little smaller

Once he'd cleared the town, Jack shed his costume, humming under his breath as he walked, still in shock over how stupid he'd been. Norrington had offered him a pardon—a pardon! Norrington! He could have sailed up to Rock Fort, danced a jig and sung "The Bastard King of England" for a column of Marines, and nobody would have looked at him twice. All he'd had to do was promise to leave British ships alone and hand over a bit of booty to the king. Nobody said he had to *keep* that promise.

But Norrington had to go and be obnoxious, and Jack had lost his head. In the short-term, it had been worth it. That stern face flushed with outrage, pale eyes wide with wounded pride—blimey, that looked good on him. Norrington was not used to hearing the word "no", and he was young enough to argue with it instead of simply ignoring it like a seasoned tyrant.

It took Jack most of the afternoon to make his way up the sandy Palisadoes to the mainland, then up the coast to the Hope River estuary where he'd tucked his ship. As he went, he could feel the trill of the river current over her bows as she strained at her cable, her anchor clutching the silty bottom, waiting. He sent a little wish to her, a promise to hurry.

When he turned up the beach at last, his crew were rolling the great water casks down to the water's edge, and shouts drifted across the river from the boats crowding the *Pearl's* beam where booms and tackles hoisted more casks aboard. Gibbs leaned over the rail, hollering orders, and on the beach, Anamaria was bossing around four burly men lifting a cask into a boat.

Gibbs waved when he saw Jack, but Anamaria scowled. "Of course you show up when the work's done," she snapped. "And by the way, you look like an idiot."

"It was necessary," said Jack, "if I was to deal with Norrington like to like." He bent over to scoop up a handful of sand and scrubbed his white-caked face with it. He didn't know what was in this makeup, but it itched like crazy.

"So what now? He gonna leave us alone? You make a deal with him?"

"He wanted to join up—practically begged me, actually—but I told 'im my pirates would never turn Navy."

Anamaria tore off her hat and stomped on it. "You fool! You could have bought us some protection from that maniac and you threw it away? You are the stupidest pirate in the history of pirates!"

"Darling," said Jack, wounded, "don't tell me you *want* to sail under that silly ponce!"

"We wouldn't have to! If you'd said yes, we could have sailed right up to Rock Fort for our water instead of getting devoured by mosquitoes in the jungle. We could've put into any English port we wanted. We could have had freedom for all the time it took Norrington to figure out he'd been tricked!"

Now was not the time to tell her that all of these things had occurred to him. It was necessary to maintain a façade of consistency. "An' make 'im that much more resolved to hang us? Nay, 'tis better this way. Better to be honest adversaries than bitterly sundered allies. Just ask me mum an' dad."

"I should hit you." She shoved her hat back on her head. "I should shoot you where you stand." She shrugged. "But the crew likes you."

Jack had kicked off his shoes and waded out into the water, where he was bent over and scrubbing his face. The damn stuff didn't seem to be water-soluble either. "Relax, darling," he said through his hands, leery of his arse's exposure to blows. "It will all be moot once we're very, very rich off those treasure galleons."

Anamaria folded her arms. "Mark my words," she said, "you'll never take those galleons if you're counting on that lazy, lying pack of drunkards to help."

"Oi." Jack stood up. "Deadwater Dan is a fine pirate. Was. We can get him back in top form if we hide the bottle for a week or two."

"If that's what you think, we're as good as dead."

"All right, all right." Jack scrubbed at his cheeks with his bare hands. "Forget Deadwater. There's still Captain Booth, and—"

"Captain? The only thing Benedict Booth is captain of is the rum barrel he goes to sleep in every night."

"Don't underestimate that rum barrel. Bend a few sails to it and—"

"Is that really all you got, Jack? Those cork-brained swill tubs who steal liquor to buy whores?"

"If you'd let me speak, madam," said Jack, "it jus' so happens that in an hour's time, we are expected at Maroon's Cave for a meeting of the Brethren."

"An hour?" Anamaria folded her arms. "If we're on pirate time, make it three hours. Or three days, more like."

"No faith, any of you." Jack shed his jacket, clawed at his face one last time, and climbed into the boat.

An hour later, as the light was dying, they marched up the muddy path into the lush Hope river canyon. Jack knew he was right about Norrington. The man lived in a world where a broken promise was an act of war, not just good business. If Jack had violated that letter, Norrington would have taken it very, very personally. Which was a shame, really. Deep down, Norrington was a selfish, dishonest man; if only he'd drop the farce and let it out, they might have something to say to each other. But instead, he made high-handed offers to pay Jack to be dishonest for him. How he expected to get anywhere by being such an arsehole, Jack had no idea.

"What happened at the fort, Cap'n?" asked Gibbs, catching up.

"Nothin'," Jack replied. "Nothin' happened. We remain completely, manifestly *status quo*."

"Ah." They marched on. Gibbs turned to Jack with worry. "You look terrible. You comin' down with somethin'?"

"Makeup," Jack grumbled. "Lead-based, I think."

"Blimey." Gibbs looked horrified. "I hear lead does things to a man's mind."

"Luckily I have little to fear on that front," said Jack. "Did we remember the rum? Nobody'll stay a moment at this little parley if we can't wet their whistles."

"All taken care of." Gibbs gestured back at two men carrying rundlets of rum on their shoulders.

No doubt he included himself amongst those who needed this incentive. "How many men d'you reckon'll show up?"

"I put out the word for a score, so if we apply the standard pirate reliability co-efficient, I'd say we can expect...oh, half a dozen."

"That many?" Gibbs shook his head. "I dunno, Jack...it's been a while since pirates organized. Why, I'd say it hasn't been since—"

"The first man to say 'Bartholomew Roberts' goes in the gorge," snapped Jack. He narrowed his eyes. "I've already been Black Barded once today, an' not even by a pirate."

Gibbs's eyes widened. "He didn't."

Jack grimaced. "He did."

"Well—well—" Gibbs waved a hand. "Norrington's no Chaloner Ogle, either!"

"*Sir* Chaloner Ogle." Jack scowled. "You get a knighthood for endin' big-name pirates these days." He grinned. "I'll bet Norrington's slaverin' for a knighthood."

"Ah, he's not so bad." Gibbs winced under Jack's murderous look. "All I'm sayin' is, I've served under some hard-horse officers, an' he weren't one of 'em."

"No one's *serving* under anybody." Jack stopped, throwing up his hands. "We're bloody pirates! We don't take letters of marque, we don't need permission to steal treasure ships, an' we'll fill our bloody water casks wherever we bloody please! Honestly, will you all be wantin' feather beds and a kiss goodnight next? Who here is actually still an honest-to-God *pirate*?"

Gibbs stopped and peered into the mouth of Maroon's Cave, where Jack's words were still echoing. "Fewer than you'd think, apparently."

Jack gaped at the empty hole in the hillside. Not a soul was there, pirate or otherwise. "I don't believe it," he said, and sat morosely down where he stood.

After a while, they built a fire. Jack nudged the burning sticks with his toe, sunk in thought. Norrington was a problem. A year ago, Jack would have laughed at the idea of him as competition, but he grew more complex each time they met. Jack had always figured him for the sort to go to bed with an engraving of King George under his arm, but he'd said that Spanish word like a Spaniard—*a-zoag-way*, not *a-zog-yew*. For someone so insufferably English, butchering the Spanish language was practically compulsory. Maybe he only looked like a dandy fool. Then again, maybe not.

The rum was nearly gone when they heard voices on the trail. "See, Cap'n?" said Gibbs brightly. "They were just on pirate time."

"Sometimes I hate pirates," Jack muttered. "Gentlemen!" He leapt to his feet. "Welcome to the Brethren's first council of war in nearly two decades. Drink?"

One of the pirates, a black-haired fellow in a straw hat called Benedict Booth, pulled out the bung and held his flask under the stream of rum. "What'sa matter with you, Sparrow?" he said, drinking till the liquor poured down his chin. "You look like you've had your face in the baker's wife's bosom."

"If only I had," Jack muttered. "As it happens, it was Norrington's bosom—metaphorically

speaking." Everyone in the cave pondered that image. "Good God, he'd make a frightful woman," Jack concluded.

"What's this talk of treasure?" The other man came up to join the circle, a square, blond, sunburned pirate called Deadwater Dan. "Why, hello." He sat on a log beside Anamaria. With a glare at Jack, she planted her heel in the man's belly and shoved him off.

"Fleet," said Jack. "Treasure *fleet*."

"You're mad," gaped Booth. "No one's tried to take the treasure fleet in thirty years!"

"Hear, hear," said Deadwater, sitting up. "There's easier treasure to be had."

"No vision, any of you." Jack looked Deadwater up and down. "I don't see these alleged heaps o' treasure improvin' *your* lifestyle."

"Forget it," said Booth. "Find a bigger idiot for the job."

Jack looked from face to drunken face around the fire. "Don't you even wanna hear my plan?" When no one objected, he forged ahead. "We'll take the galleons off Cartagena, see, by dressin' up as *guarda costas*. Then we'll take 'em to Portobello an' load up with the King's treasure—I've got a few clever friends there who can help us. Then we'll split 'em up—one to Old Providence, one to Cozumel, *et cetera*, till we've scattered the loot all over the Spanish Main." He looked around. "Well?"

Booth shook his head. "It's not one of your best, Sparrow. There's no way to hide that much treasure."

"The Spanish an' the English are too busy fightin' to bother. While they fight, we'll slip quietly away. That's how Norrington can help us, savvy?"

"Norrington?" Deadwater looked around anxiously. "He nearby?"

"He's safely in his fort," said Jack with a wink, "right where I left 'im."

Deadwater regarded him with awe. "Saints! How'd ya do it?"

"Come on, now," said Booth with a wave. "You're afraid of that toy soldier?"

Jack frowned. No, he would not defend the man, not if he had to cut out his own tongue.

"He nearly had your head in a noose," said Deadwater to Booth, agog.

"So 'e did," Booth shrugged, "*nearly*. But enough about bloody Norrington. Sparrow, how you gonna fence all that quicksilver?"

"Fence?" Jack tried not to tear his hair. "All that treasure is starin' you in the face an' you're worried about how you're gonna *sell* it?"

"You'll never do it with so few men," said Booth.

"I defy you to look up any of my former exploits," said Jack, "an' show me one where they didn't say the exact same thing."

No one had an answer for this.

"Honestly, mates," Jack pleaded, "what else have you got to do these days?"

Booth and Deadwater looked at each other and shrugged.

With two more pirate captains thus recruited, Jack left the drunker members of his party to sleep it off around the fire and hiked back down the canyon to his ship.

"If it's just them, we're buggered," said Anamaria as they walked.

"Don't worry, I told 'em to spread the word."

"That's what I'm afraid of." She spat in the dust. "What if it turns around and too many guests show up to this party?"

"If we got all the buccaneers from Panama to Barbados in on this, we'll still be able to retire."

"That's what you said about Isla de Muerta."

"That's why I've set a new policy against supernatural loot. Too unpredictable."

Anamaria cackled. "There was a time when you weren't interested unless it was unpredictable. You gettin' old, Captain Sparrow? Should I call you Old Man Sparrow now? Maybe find you a walking stick?"

"That's enough." Jack waved angrily. "I jus' wanna live to enjoy what I steal, that's all."

Anamaria was still laughing. "You're gettin' old. Old old old. Old—"

"You'll be swimming off this island in a moment!" Jack snapped.

She stopped, her grin dying. "Sometimes I think you ain't the same Jack Sparrow I used to know," she said, and walked on ahead.

"Maybe I ain't," Jack called after her. "The world ain't the same place either." Crossing his arms and lowering his head, he marched on, trying not to wonder if maybe Norrington was right. One thing could be said for the man: he was always on time.

Lying in his bunk, he tried to make plans, but Norrington interposed himself again. The man was insufferable—with that nasal sneer and that little smirk like butter wouldn't melt up his arse. Jack would love to throw him over his expensive cherrywood desk and find out just how hot it was in there. His prick stirred. Oh, yes, his prick certainly liked Norrington, even if the rest of him didn't.

Twirling the little pistol on his finger, he thought about those long legs in their white silk stockings, curving with luscious precision like ivory tusks. He thought about tearing that uniform open down the front, sending brass Tudor roses flying, stripping away the wool and lace down to the skin, fragrant and warm. Norrington was terrified of that, no doubt—of being pried open like a clam. If only Jack could do it and escape with his life.

The moon behind the window crawled from one mullion to the next. They wanted the same thing, which meant they'd come to blows unless Jack could trick him somehow. He pictured Norrington on the deck of that monstrous ship of his, mind busy at work behind that frozen face, a motionless portent of doom. One thing was certain: Jack had to decide whether he wanted to fleece Norrington or fuck him, because trying both would be dangerous.

Anamaria wouldn't call him old if he contrived to wind the Commodore's clock a turn or two. It

would do the man good. Norrington so loved pushing people around—being held down and done to for a change might wipe that smirk off his pretty face. And the world only had to force a choice on Jack to set him scheming about how he might have it both ways.

19 October, 1739

In the fuzzy circle of James's spyglass, the barge crept toward them on the gray waves, the Spanish Navy's red and blue like brilliant blossoms scattered on the surf. In the distance, the yellow walls of Cartagena sloped into the sea, their feet vanishing under crashing breakers. The sun pressed on James's neck like a weight. In England, fires were banked high and heavy coats were coming out; here in the Spanish Main, the blazing summer went on and on. His scalp itched; the glass slipped on his wet palm. Behind him, the company of HMS *Sheerness* stood as still as a pine grove. Sweating Marines presented arms. In their silence, the cry of gulls pierced the hot afternoon and James felt the surf pounding on the city walls deep in his body.

As ships of war went, theirs could not have looked more harmless—a lone frigate in enemy waters, gun ports shut, flag of truce flying at the masthead. James had left the *Dauntless* in Port Royal because she couldn't help looking bellicose. This was a mission of peace—on the surface, at least.

Captain Stapleton and his first lieutenant hovered beside him.

"Lieutenant," said James, still watching the barge, "lower your boat once we have taken the Admiral below. They'll see you from the city, but they shouldn't fire on you." He shifted the glass over to the mouth of the harbor, and the masts of hulks that had been sunk there to block it. "A glimpse is all you need; but make sure you're certain."

"Aye, sir." Stapleton's first lieutenant wasn't much younger than James, but his voice was high with nerves.

"How is our friend faring?" asked James, tucking the glass inside his coat.

"As unpleasant as always," said Stapleton.

"Lovely," said James. "This ought to be a meal of rare enjoyment."

The barge disappeared under the *Sheerness*'s gunwale, and then the Spaniards were piped aboard. Three of them sprang over the side and drove back the men nearby, then reached down to help a fourth. Everyone held their breath at the awkward spectacle. Admiral Don Blas de Lezo y Olavarrieta swayed in the grasp of his struggling men, veins standing out as he hauled on his men's arms until he cast himself with a stumble onto the deck. He stooped there for a moment, collecting his dignity, before unfolding to his regal height.

James tried not to stare. The Admiral was as grand and ruined as a statue in a Roman plaza. Sculptural cheek bones held up an empty eye socket, his right sleeve hung empty, and his wooden leg was loud on the planks. *El Medio Hombre*, he was called with affection by his grateful countrymen. During the siege of Barcelona, he'd captured twelve British ships, including the rich privateer *Stanhope*. James felt very young.

He bowed. "*Almirante*, welcome aboard His Majesty's ship *Sheerness*. This is Captain Miles Stapleton."

"Commodore. Captain." Don Blas made a stiff bow, fingers white around the handle of his walking stick. His gray wig fell to his shoulders, and over his coat, he wore a steel cuirass, which brought war abruptly into their midst. He glanced around, lips curled with skeptical humor. "This is the

very ship that took mine, is it not? Tell me, how answers my *Fuerte*?"

"She is a marvelous sailer," James replied smoothly. "As stiff and weatherly as any ship from our yards."

"Oh, many thanks." Don Blas's smile was thin. "I do hope you haven't insulted her by turning her into a transport or the like."

"Oh, no," said James, "you may expect to see her flying British colors in the line of battle if ever we meet under more belligerent circumstances."

"I would hope so," Don Blas grimaced.

"Shall we go below?" said James. "You must be eager to see Don Pedro."

The Admiral gave another dry smile. "Oh, yes. Most definitely."

Captain Don Pedro Elizagaray was unhappy at the best of times, but right now, he was wretched. He had lost his ship to a ruse, and the Admiral clearly regretted the ship more than her captain. James felt a stir of pity watching Don Pedro tear valiantly into his mutton, trading his fork for his wine glass without pause, avoiding the eyes of his countrymen. It was a quieter meal than James cared for, as the only thing they all had in common was likely to be a sore subject. Nonetheless, it came up.

"I have witnessed your Navy make fools of themselves on a number of occasions," said Don Blas cheerfully, "but I grant that many of you are fine sailors. Captain Stapleton, I am eager to hear the tale of how you took my ship—especially since Don Pedro is here to correct you in the particulars."

Stapleton glanced at James in a panic. James nodded. "Well," said Stapleton, "it's no great tale of seamanship, if that's what you're wanting. She was hove to off Portobello when we came upon her. We run up French colors for our own protection, since we was so mightily outgunned, but when we drew closer, we saw nary a ready man aboard, so we resolved to come near, then run out our guns afore she could sense our intent. And so we did, and carried away her foretopmast afore she could answer fire. The captain—" Stapleton nodded at Don Pedro, who had been reddening as the tale went on, "—he weren't even out of his bunk until the first shots were fired, I reckon."

"That is not true!" Don Pedro snarled, throwing down his knife.

"You would rather be considered incompetent than unprepared?" asked Don Blas with amusement.

Don Pedro trembled. "We were deceived by an honorless trick!"

"One must occasionally choose between honor and victory," said Don Blas, nodding contemplatively. "Still, Captain Stapleton, he has a point. It was a clever maneuver, but one more worthy of a pirate, don't you think?"

It was Stapleton's turn to redden. "I am at war, sir," he replied, and pressed his mouth into a white line. The table waited, but he did not speak again.

"The truth remains," said Don Blas, ending the awkward pause, "if *I* had been aboard the *Fuerte* that day, you would not have taken her."

The silence that followed gave the various men at the table a chance to reflect on how they'd each

been insulted.

James cleared his throat. "Well, then. Let's proceed to business, shall we? Admiral, as much as we have enjoyed entertaining Don Pedro as our guest, we thought you would want to negotiate for his release."

Don Blas's good eye shifted. "And what terms do you propose?"

"Merely the release of two factors of the South Sea Company you have been detaining these last months."

"Ah, yes, well—" Don Blas pursed his lips. "I'm afraid this I cannot do. *Lo siento*, Don Pedro."

James needed back those South Sea agents about as much as Don Blas would miss them. Still, he made a show. "But whyever not? I am proposing an equal exchange that would leave both of our balances clear."

"I see your point," said Don Blas stiffly. "However, it is not my decision to make. Once the viceroy has arrived, perhaps we can talk again."

Whether or not the Admiral had noticed his slip, James quickly buried the interesting news about the viceroy. "Not even for your own flag-captain?" He waved his hand passionately. "If Captain Stapleton were captured, I would happily part with a few civilian prisoners whose only crime was to be on foreign soil when war was declared across the ocean."

"I apologize, Commodore," said Don Blas in a hard voice, "but I must refuse your offer."

James had a sudden desire to beg Don Blas to tell him how he had taken those twelve ships. He shored up his confidence, sipped his wine, and said, "I must remark that you've shown more concern for your ship than you have for your captain."

Don Blas reddened. "It is simply that I trust Don Pedro to remember that he is Spanish—unlike my poor *Fuerte*, who has no choice but to fly her enemy's colors."

The silence deepened. Everyone ate quickly and noisily. Only Don Blas took his time, heedless of the tension. At his side, a young captain reached over to cut his meat. If anyone found the spectacle unmanning, they didn't show it.

"So," he said, as though he'd never paused, "your government has chosen Admiral Vernon to try to drive us from the Caribbean."

No reply seemed appropriate, so James took another bite and waited for the Admiral to make his point.

"Having fought against him when we were both younger men," Don Blas went on with a smirk, "I must say I'm a little insulted."

It seemed better to keep his mouth shut. Don Blas looked up at the stony English faces around him and smiled. "I'm not interested in talking about the Admiral," he said, spearing a piece of meat once it had been cut for him. "I'd much rather talk about you, Commodore."

This made James pause with his fork in the air.

"You distinguished yourself splendidly before you even needed a razor, if I'm not mistaken. How about telling us the tale, say, of your action in the *Garland* against three Turkish pirate ships?"

James hid his alarm. "Forgive me if I don't wish to reveal my habits in battle to you, Admiral."

"Oh, come," said Don Blas, "your gazette has already made it a matter of public record. You won't be telling me anything I don't know. I would simply like to hear it from you."

The Admiral's strategy was growing clear. "Only if you will answer my tale with one of your own," James replied.

"Of course," Don Blas laughed. "Perhaps you would like to hear about the capture of the *Stanhope*?"

Every Englishman at the table bristled.

"Your tale first," said Don Blas with a smile.

"Very well." James cleared his throat. He was not at ease telling stories, especially in front of his own men. "I was first lieutenant under Captain Lord Aubrey Beauclerk aboard his first posted command. The Dey of Algiers had just refused our offer of a treaty, taking offense that such a young man had been sent to negotiate with him..."

And so James gave a dry, unembellished account of one of the pivotal moments of his life, an engagement in which he'd been more terrified, and more jubilant, than he'd ever been before or since.

"...and so we crossed the wake of the remaining Turkish ship and gained the weather-gage, and she struck her colors soon after."

"The weather-gage." Don Blas tutted. "You English are so obsessed with the weather-gage. You have no idea what you're missing, not learning to fight from the leeward position."

James blinked. "It's a matter of advantage, I should think. Why choose the defensive position if you can gain an offensive one?"

"You'd be surprised. Men on the defensive are much harder to predict." He shrugged. "But it is an English failing, I think, that lack of imagination."

A frisson of anger straightened James's spine. "In the Royal Navy, we prize discipline over imagination, and it has yet to fail us."

Don Blas laughed. "It certainly failed the *Stanhope*."

James knew he was being wound up. "Perhaps you could tell us that story now."

"Later, later." Don Blas was still laughing. The rest of the table was silent. "Relax, Commodore. I say these things from an older commander to a younger, as a bit of friendly advice. You are an interesting man, and it is too bad your government saw fit to replace a superior officer with an inferior one. For myself, I regret that I shall not have the pleasure of playing the game with you."

James nodded coldly. "The loss is all mine."

"Vernon has been making a nuisance of himself in Parliament, hasn't he?" Don Blas's good eye glittered. "It must irk you to have to step down simply because the Prime Minister wanted to get rid of the man."

"I do not question what my country asks of me," said James smoothly, "and I take joy in it, as I am

sure you do."

There was approval in Don Blas's smile. "May it serve you well."

Silverware squeaked on plates, glasses drained, and the noisy sound of snuff being taken broke the silence—and then dinner was over. The master-at-arms led Don Pedro back to his cabin, and James went topside with the Admiral.

On the gangway, Don Blas stopped James. "Do give my regards to your Admiral Vernon," he said, and then in Spanish, he added, "That man is not your equal. I wish you luck."

James nodded, flattered in spite of himself. Only after the Admiral's barge had disappeared under the city walls did he realize Don Blas had extracted all of their stories without telling his own.

Nombre de Dios, twenty miles up the coast from Portobello, had once been the terminal of the treasure fleet and the site of the annual fair. Now it was a few fishermen's shacks with faces in doorways like cedar bark, small men, half-starved and unkillable. Anyone of breeding had fallen to the place's noxious climate, or moved with the fair to Portobello.

Jack had no use for it—the place smelled like a swamp, there was no money, and no one had a sense of humor. From the harbor, what there was of it, he turned inland up the wide dirt road—the old Camino Real, somewhat overgrown but still navigable. As night fell, coast became forest, where he was less at home, but he'd followed this path a hundred times. Soon he caught the smell of cooking. Pulling his boots up snugly, he left the road and struck out into the jungle, following his nose. He fought through vines and lianas and finally tumbled out into a well tended clearing, where palm-thatched huts breathed steady trails of smoke.

Four muskets pointed at him, in the hands of four men.

Jack smiled graciously. "You must be new here," he said, making a little bow. "It's just old Captain Jack Sparrow."

The man furthest to the left sighed and lowered his gun. "It's dark, you idiot," he said in a dialect that was as far from Castilian as they were from Spain. "Where have you been, Jack? It's been a year."

"My dear fellow"—Jack swung an arm over the man's bare shoulders—"I have been busy."

"I'll bet you have." The man jerked his head toward the center of the village. "Come. You'll want to see Suah."

Suah Vidaurri's house was the largest in the village, but it was small enough to be warm and gloomy like a ship's cabin. The table wasn't as bountiful as Don Francisco's, but Suah's generosity relative to his means was far greater, which made Jack feel generous himself. After wolfing down two fish he hadn't been hungry for until he'd smelled them cooking, he took a bag out of his waistband. "Brought you a present," he grinned at Suah, who sat half-reclining by the fire, and tossed the bag onto the low table. It fell between them with a heavy crunch. "I helped myself to the Governor's pocket change a few weeks ago."

Suah opened it and looked inside. "Pieces of eight? What am I going to do with these?"

Jack's face fell. "Hadn't thought of that."

"Not everyone loves silver as much as you," Suah smirked, shaking his head. "But come now—"

He waved at Jack's dejected look. "Eat."

Jack devoured another fish.

"You don't look like you've been starving," said Suah. "Your lean period is over, I take it?"

"Oh, most definitely. But I'm always thinking ahead." Jack downed a bowl of *chicha*. Much better than wine; closer to rum. "Never know when you'll hit another dry spell."

"You're welcome here. But it worries me, that look you're wearing: a look of cunning."

Jack grinned. "Suah," he said, leaning forward, "I'm this close to laying my hands on the King's treasure for this year."

Suah sat up with alarm. "You're going to hold up the *recuas*?"

"Nah, not my style. Too messy—armed guard, all those mules running this way and that. I'll let them reach Portobello before I take the cash off their hands."

"Don't be stupid. That would be impossible."

"Never tell Captain Jack Sparrow a thing's impossible, mate. You'll just encourage him. Besides, that's why I'm here—I need your help."

"What?" Suah set down the silver. "Are you mad?"

"Here's the thing." Jack's eyes glittered. "A few of the Brethren and I will capture the treasure galleons when they're off Cartagena. We'll sail them to Portobello before anyone's the wiser, and load up with the treasure from Panama there. But we can't do it alone."

Suah sighed. "You must understand something. If you rob the King's treasure at Portobello, the Spanish will suspect us. No—they will accuse us whether they believe we did it or not. They will burn our crops, make a nuisance of themselves—they might even want to go to war, though not without thinking twice after what happened the last time. Still, it is a headache we could do without."

Jack blinked. "Oh."

"We have been good friends to you, and we're always happy to help if it means misery for the Spanish. But we have to live here."

Jack leaned back, watching the smoke, listening to the part of him argue that refused to make a choice. At last, he said, "Who would I have to be to steal that treasure without getting you in hot water?"

"Who?" Suah frowned. "I doubt they'd be suspicious of us if the English sacked Portobello. Even so, they haven't forgotten our alliance with Drake and the others, although it's a hundred years dead."

"So if I found a way to be English..."

"Jack, no more of this." Suah crossed his arms. "Come back when you want to talk peace, not war."

Jack made the biggest eyes he could. "Are you kicking me out?"

Suah sighed, but his face was hard. "Think of others for once. Find other Spaniards to rob—or try

holding onto your silver for a change. We sustain ourselves on the barest means, while you could starve with a king's ransom in your pockets. How do you manage it? Do your pockets have holes? If that's it, my wife could solve your troubles right now—and ours."

Suah was not the only Cimarrón chief of Jack's acquaintance, but he was the only one who would tolerate being woken in the middle of the night. Jack knew when to give in.

Struggling through the jungle and then trotting back along the Camino Real, he watched the dark spaces between the trees and remembered when they had teemed with buccaneers, one behind every boulder waiting for a Spaniard to come along. Suah's people had been in the thick of it. Like everyone else, they'd turned domestic, and now the king's treasure made it from Panama to Portobello every year without so much as a silver ingot lost. There was something wrong with a world in which that happened.

24 October, 1739

The *Sheerness* opened up Port Royal Harbor to show a depressing sight: a battle squadron that hadn't been there when they'd left. Among the ships at anchor was a gorgeous monstrosity James recognized as the *Burford*, flying a blue flag at her foretopmast. Admiral Vernon.

James clasped his hands behind his back. "Captain Stapleton," he said, "fifteen guns to windward, if you please."

He'd wanted so much to capture those treasure galleons before the Admiral arrived—not simply because he didn't want to share the prize, but because they were his right. This was his squadron, his station—he had built it from nothing over the ten years he'd been here, and if anyone caught that treasure fleet, they would owe it to him. But now with the Admiral here, James would be forgotten.

James had no intention of being forgotten. He had a plan to catch those galleons and he would make sure Vernon did not take credit for it. The galleons were shut up in Cartagena now, but soon they would strike out for Portobello, and if the English could capture Portobello first, the galleons would sail right into their net. The key to surviving Vernon would be to force his opinion early, so that the man would never have the opportunity to shunt him aside. He could do this; he had plans for himself.

The last of the fifteen guns went off, and the clear air rang in the silence. A minute later, the *Burford* began her reply. James watched the smoke drift across the water, creeping between the frigates and bomb-ketches as the guns boomed with lazy regularity, eleven...twelve...thirteen. The smoke dispersed in the quiet.

James looked up at his broad pendant flying at the masthead. Tradition was strict: eleven guns for a captain, thirteen for a flag officer. Vernon was telling him he could stay a commodore, for now.

It was dusk by the time the master-attendant had piloted them to their mooring place in the crowded anchorage. The *Burford* had signaled not long ago, and James could no longer delay.

"Boat ahoy!" came the cry from the *Burford*.

"Flag!" replied James's coxswain, throwing over the tiller to slide the barge along the *Burford*'s massive side. Above them, shadowed faces moved in the lantern light. On deck, James traded salutes with Watson, Vernon's flag-captain, a man notorious throughout the service for his inability to hold his drink. There was a strained note in the man's cordiality and James wondered if Watson

saw him as a threat. Forgetting him for the moment, James followed the officer of the watch below.

As he stepped into the stateroom, his eyes fell on the Admiral's large face in a giltwood mirror before the man turned to him, squinting, not quite smiling. "You'd be Norrington," he said, brow scrunching into rolls. "What with all that noise."

"Admiral." James bowed. "It's an honor to have you in Port Royal, sir."

"Like hell it is." Vernon laughed savagely. "You hate that I'm here, taking your command. There's no shame in it. I don't trust a man who isn't ambitious. Now sit down and have a drink while we discuss what we're going to do before that foolish governor and the local Army idiot get involved."

Vernon's face was squashed flat at the bottom, like an onion bottle or a pear that had sat too long. His eyes drooped at the corners and a collar of pink flesh strained against his cravat. He splashed brandy into a glass at a mahogany sideboard and pressed it at James, who nearly dropped it. "I'm in the Caribbean for one reason," the Admiral said, pouring his own drink: "to destroy Spanish commerce. That means Cartagena or Portobello. We haven't got enough ships for Cartagena so Portobello it must be. But we haven't a moment to lose—the rainy season's on its way and disease will fix us as quick as any fleet. Now—I understand you've just come from Cartagena. Wish you could've been here when I arrived, but if you have some intelligence to show for it, I'll let it slide. So?"

"The *azogue* galleons are there," said James, "and I have it on good authority that the money from Panama has reached Portobello. If we were to—"

"Excellent. I suppose you can stay. And Don Blas de Lezo—how did you find the old cripple?"

"Capable and confident, sir. He is not to be treated lightly. But Portobello, sir—"

"Confident?" Vernon snorted. "Not for much longer. The galleons will leave Cartagena soon, so if we move quickly, we can snatch up the cash at Portobello and be there to seize the galleons when they come sailing into our net."

James sighed. "Precisely what I was going to suggest, sir."

"Excellent." Vernon tossed his drink down his throat. "Call a council of war. Swann will want to be there, I suppose. We sail for Portobello as soon as possible."

"Aye, sir."

Vernon laughed, rubbing his hands together. "I told Parliament I could take Portobello with six ships. How they'll crow about us at home, eh?"

"I'm sure they will, sir."

"Pull everything together: estimates for stores and victuals, all our current intelligence and coastal surveys, pilots—do we have pilots?"

"Aye, sir."

Vernon squinted malignantly at him. "You're not thinking of using Spaniards, are you? I will not have any Spaniards at the helms of my ships, do you understand?"

"Not Spaniards, sir. There are many Englishman—"

"Smugglers, you mean. Pirates. I'll touch them, but only with a ten-foot pole. Still, better than Spaniards."

James pursed his lips. "I was referring to my own men."

"Damned smugglers." Vernon harrumphed. "Criminals or not, you could have protected them better. If you'd put more of your frigates off the Spanish coasts to watch those *guarda costa* bastards instead of—whatever the hell you had them doing—then that fool Jenkins might still have his ear attached to his head instead of in a jar where he can wave it around in front of any poor sod who'll listen. Including me. Do you realize what magnitude of pest that man is?"

"I do." James revisited an unpleasant memory. "He made the rounds with it out here long before he brought it to Parliament."

Vernon laughed. "I say he was lucky it was only an ear that Spaniard cut off. If he'd seen what those Saltee rovers in the Mediterranean do—well, I digress. Point is, you should have been looking out."

"I acknowledge my responsibility, sir."

"Yes, well. You're young and probably shouldn't have had such an important command so early in your career. In a way, it's lucky for you I'm stepping in before you did any serious damage."

Since anything James might have said in reply would have resulted in his not having a career any longer, he kept quiet.

"Still," Vernon went on, looking out the stern windows toward the lights on shore, "you've done some good with the place. The new careening wharf—your work?"

"It is." James swallowed past his anger, and thought of his duty. "I've spent the last few years working on the facilities in Port Antonio—"

"Ah," Vernon laughed, "you're *that* Norrington! You argued with the Navy Board for a year about which side of the harbor to put a storehouse on."

James straightened. "With respect, sir, I am trained as an engineer. The gentlemen in London were misled by their experts and motivated entirely by cost-saving in the short-term—"

"Relax," Vernon chuckled. "I like a young man who isn't afraid to tell the world he knows better than they do. Hiding your light under a bushel is treason, as far as I'm concerned."

"Er, thank you, sir."

"But you've been lucky so far. That might have been career suicide if the wrong men had been in charge."

"I considered it worth the risk, sir."

"Good. Just be careful." Vernon scrutinized him. "You're arrogant and independent, and I plan to exploit that, but if it stings me, you'll wish you'd never been born, understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"James Norrington..." Vernon sat back down. "You're the son of an Army man, are you not?"

"I am, sir," James replied hesitantly. He knew Vernon's opinion of the Army.

"So tell me," said Vernon, delighted to put James on the spot, "why didn't you join up yourself?"

"Because," said James, "I preferred to render my services to an institution that rewards merit."

This was evidently the right answer.

James spent his evening squinting at vouchers, stretching store totals, and drafting memoranda. At two bells in the forenoon the next morning, he signaled to the *Sheerness* for her first lieutenant to come aboard.

Lieutenant Rentone had peered into Cartagena's harbor while James and Stapleton were dining with Don Blas. He was a talented seaman, and James could stand to be around him for more than five minutes, which already put him ahead. He had a small flat nose, a bony chin, and an extraordinary number of freckles. It was not a beautiful but an amiable and honest face, and not as young as it looked.

James put down his pen. "Good morning, Lieutenant. Have a seat."

"Thank you, sir." Rentone folded his tall figure into a chair.

"I understand that your cruises in the *Sheerness* have given you the opportunity for coastal surveys."

Pale cheeks colored. "Sir—it took no time away from our regular orders—"

"Relax, Lieutenant, you're not under censure. Quite the reverse. Would you say your knowledge of the coastline around Portobello is sufficient for you to navigate close to shore?"

Rentone's head bobbed. "It is, sir."

"Good. Then you shall attend a council of war this afternoon between myself, Admiral Vernon, Governor Swann, and Captain Newton of the Infantry. You are to pilot the squadron into Portobello Harbor for our assault on the town."

Rentone looked like he'd been offered the key to London. "Sir—I don't know what to say—"

"Say, 'Aye, sir, I will attend.'"

"Aye, sir, I will attend."

"Excellent. Three-thirty in the afternoon at the Governor's mansion. Be late at your peril."

Rentone leapt to his feet. "Thank you, sir."

"It is I who must thank you. That will be all."

The young man fled.

16 November, 1739

There wasn't much one could do to disguise a ship like the *Black Pearl*. Jack had bent white canvas and rigged her according to the Spanish privateer custom, then hoisted the proper colors and called it a day. His crew had been trickier. They were filthy and ragged, not even up to privateer standards. Everyone had strict instructions not to talk. Jack had put on a rich new coat and waistcoat and a wide-brimmed hat, all courtesy of the gentleman who had donated the colors,

signals and letter of marque. Jack would have borrowed his ship too, but you had to leave a man something.

Ship and captain thus displaying the proper plumage, they lay three miles from the greatest concentration of wealth Jack had seen since Isla de Muerta: nine Spanish galleons, all leaning together in fat-bellied grace toward Portobello.

"Run up the private signal, Mr. Gibbs," said Jack, petting the silk of his waistcoat. "Tell them to heave to."

At the helm, Mr. Cotton hauled their wind and stood in toward the closest galleon. The *Pearl* cut through the water with silence on deck. Most of the crew were below to hide their numbers, waiting for the order to board. A half mile to the east, Booth's battered old Dutch galiot labored, and beyond him, Deadwater's flat-bottomed pink, the least convincing of them all.

Jack had no doubt they would succeed. It was an old buccaneer trick, but the treasure fleets had grown complacent due to a lack of buccaneers. They had bought the lie so far, heaving to as requested, trusting in the good will of the approaching strangers.

"On deck!" cried the lookout, startling everyone. "Sail ho!"

Jack's stomach froze. Not good. He scrambled up to the masthead with his spyglass. "Oh, bugger," he moaned.

The sail, not four miles off, was a real *guarda costa*.

"On deck, Mr. Gibbs!" Jack called. "Get more out of these sails! We're in a hurry now!"

The ship had filled with murmurs. "Quiet down there!" muttered Jack. "This'll all go tits-up if we give the game up now!"

Even as he said this, the galleon closest to them braced her yards around in a billow of white sail. "Oh, no," said Jack, and a moment later, her gun ports opened and she fired.

"Down!" Jack shouted as the first volley raked them from bow to stern. When he staggered to his feet, his masts were still upright and his crew still living, at least, which was good. Men were running out the guns, and Mr. Cotton had turned their head off the wind to bring the *Pearl's* broadside to bear. But the other galleons had begun firing too.

"That Spaniard must have signaled to 'em!" cried Gibbs over the din. "But how could he have known?"

"He must have recognized the *Pearl*," said Jack morosely. "In fact—" He took out his spyglass again. The ship was close enough now for Jack to recognize her: the *Tiburón*. Don Francisco de Abaroa's ship—or, rather, his new ship, since Jack had relieved him of the old one.

"The jig is up!" Jack shouted down to the deck. "Gibbs, get us out of here!"

To the east, Booth and Deadwater hadn't waited for Jack to make their own retreat. Jack swiveled around in his perch on the masthead. There was still a chance he could slip away to the south-west by setting every scrap of canvas, manning the sweeps with every mother's son and throwing the guns overboard. It would be a close shave, but he'd seen worse.

"Captain!" cried the lookout. "Sail to the south-west!"

Hardly able to believe his eyes, Jack lifted his spyglass to spot a second *guarda costa* bearing toward them. Numbly, he considered their position. It was no good—the *Pearl* could out-sail anything on the Seven Seas, but even she could do nothing against basic geometry.

Wearily, he climbed back down to the deck, where he looked around at his crew. "You're welcome to stay and fight," he said, "but if you value your hides—well, the boats make twelve knots under sail."

Everyone was silent.

"What about you, Captain?" said Anamaria.

"It took me ten years to get her back," he sighed.

In the end, his friends were sensible. He didn't begrudge them; on the contrary, he was glad they were safe. With no crew to tend the sails, he turned the ship's head downwind, uncorked a bottle of rum, and waited for the end.

In which England prevails

21 November, 1739

"By the mark, five!"

The voice of the midshipman heaving the lead in the forechains bore a warning. Drake's Islet crept by to larboard, her little yellow beach disturbingly close; James could make out the leaves on the trees. He glanced at Mr. Rentone's freckled face but found it blank.

"A quarter less five!" The voice calling the depth this time was shrill. A man standing on the ocean floor could have reached up and touched the *Dauntless* as she glided overhead. James cast another nervous glance at the islet.

Rentone met his eyes. "Not to worry, sir."

"If the wind were to back just a point, Lieutenant..." James growled. The anchor was already cock-billed so that it could drop the moment they threatened to run aground.

Rentone nodded, swallowing. "Helmsman, board it up a point." The ship's bow drew a gentle line from a cedar copse at the head of the harbor to the red cut of a mule-trail, which undoubtedly led into the town still hidden by the headland. Rentone aligned the circumferentor in his hand with the cedars. "Handsomely, now."

"By the deep, six!" The midshipman broadcasted his relief.

"Steady," said Rentone.

"South-southeast, sir," barked the quartermaster.

"Keep her so." Rentone gave James a flustered smile.

James glanced over the taffrail at the boats trailing in their wake and the *Worcester* farther back, making her turns in the swirling eddies of Rentone's. Across the water came the calls of their own worried midshipman. From behind the *Worcester's* masts peeked the yards of the *Norwich*, tracing the wakes of the ships before her in a line of battle. Apart from the singsong calls of two young men, all was silent. After a minute, the southwest end of Drake's Islet fell away to open up the harbor mouth, revealing the low fort crouching over it at the base of the tall green hills.

"Remember, we shall merely fire as we pass," said James to Gillette. "The forts at the head of the harbor are what we're interested in."

Topsails bellied out, taut and silent as the ship sailed large, wrapped in the indrawn breath before the shriek of war. Half a mile away, the Spaniards were loading their guns, hunkering down beside their pieces with their slow-matches lit, saying their prayers. James's men stood beside their own guns, watching the low gray parapet and imagining the faces that were not yet visible, as white and determined as their own.

"We'll have maybe three broadsides," said James. "Let us not waste them."

The first guns from the fort spoke, a jagged volley that barely seemed real until the first splashes erupted off the bow.

"Hold fire," said James. The fort had thirty-two-pounders, and so they would have to endure a few shots without reply. Another volley boomed, and the balls cut the air with horrible screeches. Still too far away to return fire, James's gun crews stood quietly, stony and grim. The acrid mineral scent of powder and slow-match laced the air.

The fort drew closer. James watched it through his spyglass for a moment, then checked it with his naked eye, judging the distance. Another round of shot screamed overhead, cutting away the weather foretopgallant shrouds and sending the mast folding down on deck. Gillette shouted orders and men scurried about, while the gun crews stood like ghosts, tuning out the activity.

Finally, James said, "You may begin."

The orders raced down the deck like a touched fuse and then the ship was rolling under her mighty broadside. The air was suddenly thick with shouts and smoke and the rumble of gun carriages. Fingers gripping the quarterdeck rail, James looked from his pocket watch to the string of gray puffs on the fort's rampart where his shots had gone home, then watched as each crenel on the parapet disappeared in a white cloud. A chorus of cries to get down were followed a split-second later by a ball tearing through the rail at the waist, sending splinters across the deck and leaving a gouge in the opposite gunwale. There was a shocked, heavy lull as men picked themselves up, then a chorus of thin hollers throughout the ship and the deck lurched as each larboard battery went off again.

They were nearly abreast of the fort. Shouts of "Fire!" filled the air and the third broadside went off, rolling the ship. James held onto the rail, watching the fort through his glass. He could see faces in the crenels now, powder-blackened and sweaty. They were within musket shot.

"Lieutenant," he called to the Marine officer, "your small-arms fire, if you please."

Muskets went off like firecrackers in the tops, and some of the blackened faces disappeared. They were fully abreast of the fort now.

"Commodore!" shouted Rentone. "The wind is veering!"

It happened almost instantly—the sails shivered and dowsed, and then the topsails flew back to the masts. The ship drifted to a stop.

"Take in topsails!" James cried. The wind was now strong in the east, blowing directly on their bow; the ship was gaining sternway. "Let go the anchor!"

A shot tore overhead and the mizzen gaff sent a rain of splinters down on the after decks. James covered his head, then straightened and took stock. The anchor splashed into the water. For a tense few seconds, the ship slid to leeward, then the anchor bit in and the cable snapped taut. They were trapped abreast of the fort with a strong headwind; there was no way forward.

Gillette joined James on the quarterdeck. "We'll have to warp up the harbor to attack the other forts, sir!"

"We won't attack them. We'll reduce this one and worry about the others later."

"But the Admiral's instructions—"

"Are not practicable at the moment. Now, we need to get closer if we're to do much damage with our small arms—Mr. Rentone? How are the soundings?"

"Very deep right up to the fort, sir," said Rentone. He was picking splinters out of his wig.

"Good. Bring our full broadside to bear."

The *Worcester* had come up to add her fire; she was dropping her anchor, following James's lead. Captain Mayne stood on the high side of the quarterdeck, making a loud point to a lieutenant, which appeared to James in pantomime. Farther back, the *Norwich* had luffed up and was attempting to ride what was left of her headway as close to the fort as she could.

Men trampled past to bring around one of the boats. James watched with mounting nerves as the longboat rowed out with the kedge-anchor; then the ship was moving under his feet as she was towed in. More shots tore up the water. "Double your musket fire, Lieutenant!" James cried.

Once the ship had crawled into her new position, the full weight of their broadside was level with the fort. "Fire!" cried lieutenants and midshipmen all over the decks, and the fastest broadside in the fleet roared again. Above them, muskets crackled and spat. Through his spyglass, James watched the fort's lower battery, which had grown quieter; bodies crammed some of the embrasures.

"Silence that upper battery!" James shouted. "We're nearly there!"

The guns of a fourth ship roared, and Vernon's flagship *Burford* luffed up into the wind behind *Norwich*. James watched her setting her anchor, and was just beginning to relax when the *Dauntless* lurched astern. He grabbed the rail as the bow swung dizzily off the wind, sending them in a great circle to leeward. A shot had cut one of their cables.

"Slip the aft cable!" he cried. "Set topsails!" Pivoting around the kedge-anchor, the stern would shortly be exposed to the fort's fire and that would be the end of them. The next few minutes were full of frantic activity as men laid aloft and the stern chasers fired. Soon, the fort was shrinking behind them.

"All hands wear ship!" James shouted, and the stern passed through the eye of the wind and then the fort was growing larger off their bow again.

"Sir! The Admiral's signaling!" A midshipman was flipping through the signal book. "Anchor and prepare the boats!"

"Very well." Once the anchor had been set, the men brought the rest of the boats alongside and Marines and seamen poured into them.

"Sir, we've got a problem," said Gillette, hurrying up the stairs.

James lowered his spyglass. "Good heavens, now what?"

"Groves has taken a splinter."

"Then I shall go with the boats," said James, tucking the spyglass back into his coat.

Boats from the other ships were rowing under the *Burford's* stern, and James ordered his to follow.

"Norrington!" cried Vernon from the quarterdeck. "A fine day for it, eh? You've no breach and no scaling ladders so you'll have to make do. Well? On with it, then!"

They set out for the shore. The guns from the fort were intermittent as the boats cut through the water. There was no beach to speak of, so they lashed the boats to driftwood and bushes as best they could and struggled up the rocks, muskets and pistols slung over shoulders and tucked in belts, bloodying their hands on the shale. A volley of musketry took down two men as they

approached the lower battery, but shortly they reached the wall.

James looked up at the cannon embrasures ten feet over their heads. "You'll have to climb on each other's shoulders!" he called to the men. "Come on, then, light along!" A Marine sergeant pulled him up past a cannon and he righted himself just in time to fell a Spaniard with his pistol. A precarious calm followed as they waited to see whether the area was clear.

"Up the stairs!" James said, drawing his sword. "Let's see who's left alive to meet us."

As the sun touched the hills behind the harbor, James stood at the taffrail of the *Dauntless* and watched the town through his spyglass. "I do believe they're looting it," he said, incredulous.

"That would be the crews from the two gun-ships left in the harbor," said Gillette. "Those shots we fired at them seem to have sent them running for the hills."

"But their own town..."

"Really, Commodore." Gillette cocked his head. "Could you swear that our seamen would not do the same in a panic?"

"I should hope not," said James. If there was one thing that kept England master of the seas, it was discipline, though it often seemed to hang upon the barest thread.

"Flag!" came the cry from a boat below, and the boatswain's pipes ushered Vernon over the side.

"Mr. Rentone!" Vernon accosted the lieutenant and threw an arm around his shoulder. "Brilliant work, young fellow!" He jostled Rentone. "You got our ships close enough for us to spit in their eye, didn't you?"

"Er—it was nothing, sir."

"I figured you'd say that. Tell you what: I'm going to give you one of those ships over there—" Vernon pointed toward the abandoned Spanish gun-ships, "—and you'll sail it back to England and give them the news of our victory. What do you say to that?"

Rentone knew exactly what that meant—he'd be celebrated, made post and given a rated ship to command, carried on shoulders through the crowd, and generally fussed over by a city of bloodthirsty patriots. He looked ill.

"I—er—thank you, sir."

"Which of them would you prefer?" asked Vernon.

Rentone blinked. "Which...?"

"The ships, Lieutenant, the ships! Which one do you want?"

"Er...the one on the right?"

"A fine choice! The *Triunfo*, I think they call her. We'll rename her HMS *Triumph*, of course, so she'll be good and English by the time you set foot aboard." Vernon laughed. "Commodore Norrington, Captain Gillette," he said, remembering they were there, "capital work."

"Sir," said James, attempting to detach a flustered Rentone from the Admiral, "we must discuss warping the ships up the harbor in the morning. If the wind stays from the east—"

"Yes, yes. Let's go below. Don't you ever relax? Come, come—"

"Boat ahoy!" cried the lookout. "Flag of truce!"

Three unarmed Spaniards came over the side and struggled their way to the quarterdeck in a knot of Marines. "The Governor sends his compliments to the Commodore," said one, and held out a sword on his palms.

James cleared his throat. "The Governor's capitulation should be directed to the Admiral."

The man shook his head. "Don Francisco insists we present it to the Commodore, whose attack upon our fort was so strong."

"Then," said James, waving his hand at the sword, "the Commodore insists it be presented to the Admiral."

Vernon chuckled darkly as he took the sword from the Spaniard. "Tell Don Francisco you executed his orders to the letter," he said, and passed the sword to James.

In the stateroom of the *Dauntless*, Vernon cast the letter of capitulation skittering in the direction of the terrified Spaniard, his face scarlet. "Does he think I'm an idiot? Of course he can't keep his damn ships! What does he think we came here for, tea? Clerk!" A long-faced young man appeared in the doorway. "Start taking this down. You there, wait. You'll have my terms in an hour. Now, clerk: number one, the garrison may march out as desired, but only on condition that our troops take possession by nine o'clock this evening. Number two..."

Around midnight, James rowed ashore to join Captain Newton, who had established his Infantry company in the fort. The chaos in the lately vacated dungeons as the surviving garrison hurried out was still settling.

Newton met James on the stairs. "Commodore, we've found something you'd better come and see."

"Oh dear," James sighed. "What now?"

They picked their way down littered staircases, one after another until they reached the subterranean dungeon. "He was here when we arrived," Newton said, gesturing to the cell at the end. "The Spaniards just left him here."

James stepped up to the bars and looked down at the man lying flat on his back in the straw. "I don't believe it," he muttered.

Sparrow smiled weakly up at him. "Awful coincidence, eh?"

"Well done!" crowed Vernon after laughing long and hard. "Never mind that it was an accident. Who's keeping track of *how* you catch the man; point is, you don't have to listen to anyone call you a fool any longer. Just run him up the yardarm tomorrow and he'll be out of your hair forever."

James blinked. "Wouldn't it be proper to return him to Port Royal and—"

"Dammit, we don't have time for that. He's already been tried; just get rid of him so we have one less thing on our minds."

James swallowed. "Aye, sir."

Sparrow was draped over the bars when James came down the steps. "Is she still out there?" he asked.

James frowned. "Who?"

"My ship!"

"The only ships in the harbor are a couple of leaky gun-boats and fishing scows."

"Damn." Sparrow struck his head against the iron. "They must've taken her somewhere else, the bastards. An' painted her some hideous color, no doubt." He sighed, raising his head. "I'm scuppered, ain't I?"

James passed him a bottle. "It would seem so."

Sparrow tore out the cork and took a slug. Then spat. "God God, man, what is this unholy stuff?"

James gaped. "That's three-year-old Haut Brion. A pipe of it costs more than I make in a month. I practically sold my soul to get it."

"Don't you have any rum?"

"Well, of course I do. My men drink two gills of it a day. Are you telling me you prefer that piss to something princes would happily drink?"

"What can I say, mate—à *chacun son goût*—oops, I guess French is treason nowadays."

"Treason is the least of your problems." James sighed. "Sparrow, you stole a ship out from under my nose and survived your own execution. Why is a criminal of your ingenuity unable to stay out of prison? How hard can it be?"

"It's a common malady amongst criminals, I'm afraid," said Sparrow sadly after guzzling from the bottle. "The inability to let a bit o' loot lie."

"Which loot?" James frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"Which loot? *Your* loot, Commodore." There was no amusement in his voice. "The treasure you wanted to join forces over. I nearly had my hands on it, but those bloody *guarda costas* turned up an' rained on me parade."

James chuckled. "Did you steal one of their ships, too?"

"As a matter of fact, I did," said Sparrow, drawing himself up.

"We should form a society," said James. "Men who have lost ships to Jack Sparrow. It will cross lines of nationality. It will be a force for peace."

Sparrow gave him an impatient smile. "So I s'pose there'd be no point in importunin' you..."

"No." James folded his hands behind his back. "You're done this time, Sparrow. As I said. You had your chance."

"So I did..." Sparrow drank deeply. "An' now you'll have your revenge."

"This has nothing whatsoever to do with revenge," said James.

"Aye, so you say. Just 'duty'. I recall your fine speech aboard the *Dauntless* after I saved you and your men, not to mention your lady-love and her—oh, maybe that was the problem—"

"Sparrow!"

"W-huh?"

"Look—" James pitched his voice down. "I gave you a chance to avoid this and you threw it back at me. I owe you nothing. If you wish to write any letters or speak to a chaplain, I can arrange it. Otherwise, you'd best square your accounts with God because you will hang as soon as the sun is up."

"Whatever, Commodore." Sparrow dropped to the ground with his legs crossed. As James turned to leave, Sparrow said, "So glad it was you. Wouldn't've been right otherwise."

"Finish your bottle," James said, and made for the stairs.

He remembered wanting Sparrow dead once, but then he'd stopped, and now he couldn't seem to start again. When he had offered that letter of marque, he'd struck his colors, as it were, and so it troubled his sense of fair play to hoist them again now, with Sparrow helpless, through his own stupidity or not.

But this was not about fair play. They were not gentlemen settling a debt of honor; one of them deserved to die. The offer of the letter had been cowardly and desperate, born of his fear of Vernon more than anything, a self-serving, face-saving measure. He was lucky he had this chance to rectify his mistake.

He did not hate Sparrow—but then, he'd have been a very different man if he killed out of hatred. Even so, it would have been easier if Sparrow were a brute.

He found Vernon in the commandant's quarters, sipping brandy over a plan of the harbor. "Ah, Norrington. You've laid mines before, haven't you?"

"I—yes, sir, but it was a very minor—"

"Splendid. The rock these castles are built on will make them the devil to blow up, so don't waste time. I want every fortification in this harbor a bed of rubble by the time we leave, understood? Get to work on them first thing in the morning—once you've hanged your pirate, that is." Vernon filled another glass and handed it to James. "Here's to the end of that grubby little rascal, eh?"

James lifted his glass weakly, and set it down.

Vernon peered at him. "I suppose you're reluctant because he helped you—and fished your fiancée out of the harbor. Don't worry, the whole fleet heard that story. But I know you, Norrington." He laughed. "You're as cold-blooded as they come. You can do it."

"Would you, sir?" asked James softly. "If the man had personally aided you, might you show a little mercy?"

"The Navy doesn't pay me to show mercy," said Vernon, throwing back his drink. "Duty requires a hard heart—just think of all the men you've sent to their deaths over the years. You think their wives understand? We're butchers, because our country asks us to be. Don't get squeamish now—it makes you less of a man."

"Aye, sir."

James climbed up to the battlement and watched the town, whose tranquil lights from a distance were flames and chaos up close. He was responsible for it. War was ugly, and Sparrow was at war with him, a ragged little nation of one. The Admiral was right: conscience was a civilian luxury. Still, Vernon's bloodthirst appalled him. Had he sounded like that once?

The flames on shore were dying. James shut his eyes, and asked God to tell him what to do.

Jack was lucky to have lived as long as he had, really. That Abaroa hadn't run him up a yardarm the moment he'd caught him was a miracle in itself. Now, fate had delivered him only to let Norrington hang him after all. He needed to have a talk with fate—when had she stopped being on his side? Men like Norrington didn't deserve luck.

When Abaroa had spared him an immediate execution, Jack had begun planning again—spend a night or two in prison, then slip out somehow and grab the *Pearl* as he went. He hadn't counted on the English sailing in, or on the Spanish moving his ship. For the first time since washing up on a desert island a decade ago, all was black. He heaved a dramatic sigh. If you didn't cry over your own fate, no one would do it for you.

He sat up, curious, as someone came down the stairs. Alas, it was a pimply sergeant with a bundle of papers and a book. *The* book, actually. "Commodore Norrington said you might be needin' these, then," the sergeant said in a thick Northern accent.

Jack accepted the Bible and the stack of foolscap with puzzlement. Maybe Norrington had been serious about that chaplain thing. Did he honestly think Jack gave a whore's tit for his immortal soul? And how was he supposed to write with no pen? He set the Bible down and flipped through the papers, frowning.

The sergeant had gone. The rustling of paper was loud in the bare room. Looking at the pages' blank white faces, like Norrington's blank words and blank eyes that demanded but never gave, Jack felt something close to despair. The little gilt cross on the cover of the Bible winked at him. He picked up the book and hurled it against the wall.

There was the distinct sound of metal clanging on stone.

He got up and went over to where the Bible lay in a jumble. Peeking out from under the crushed pages was a key.

For a long moment, Jack stared. Then he threw back his head and laughed.

His effects were in an adjoining room. Restored to full personhood, he crept up the stairs and along the passage, prepared to defend himself or flee, but he met no one and didn't expect to. The Commodore did things right when he decided to do them. That was one thing they had in common, at least. Probably the only thing, apart from a lust for treasure, an interest in ships and a healthy appreciation for Elizabeth Swann.

Jack reached the limits of the Commodore's diversion and slipped inside a doorway as two Marines passed. Then he crept down the corridor and climbed through a slit in the firing gallery that had been unexpectedly enlarged earlier that day. He stumbled down the rock as quietly as he could, making for the path that he knew led away from town and toward the mainland. As his feet scrabbled in the shale, his eyes fell on something interesting.

Standing on the ruins of an out-work was a tall figure. Straight, slender, as still as time. Jack first

made out the brim of his hat against the water; then the neat profile, with its straight nose as dainty as a lass's; then he was close enough to see lips part, as though sighing. Like the head on a coin—pretty and pompous. The darkness held its breath as Jack crept forward, reaching out with his naked blade.

The only sound Norrington made as the metal bit into his throat was a drawn breath. He tensed, but didn't move. Jack placed his chin atop one stiff shoulder.

"So I haven't given you enough that you couldn't think of something else to take," said Norrington softly.

"O ye of little faith," Jack smiled. He let his whiskers tickle Norrington's ear. "I'm not here to take, but to give."

"Really."

"Listen, now." He tucked his face into the crook of Norrington's neck. "We both want the treasure on those galleons, but in light of your recent kindness, I might be prevailed upon to share. I know you want a way around that booby of an admiral, and I can help. We could collaborate if you're willin' to do it off the books, as it were." Norrington tried to turn, but Jack checked him with a friendly dig of the knife. "Ah-ah. Just one word's all I require: yes or no."

A long moment passed. Norrington swallowed against the knife, once, twice. "Yes," he said.

"Good. In the next few months, I shall send you a gift, and then we may discuss the price of our... continued association. My ship, for instance. I've a lot to offer you in the way of intelligence, and you might have occasion to help me recover the *Pearl*. Are we in accord?"

Norrington nodded, as much as he could with steel under his chin. Jack smiled. He eased away the blade and placed a kiss on the side of Norrington's neck, just below his ear.

Norrington jerked away and hissed. Without the knife to stop him, he turned, but Jack was already running, laughing silently, free and light in his heart under cover of dark.

In the morning, James followed a frantic midshipman up the stairs to the upper battlement, where Vernon stormed over to meet them.

"Your little pirate escaped," the Admiral snarled. "What is it with you? Does iron magically crumble when you're near?"

"I'll pursue him immediately," said James, doing his best to appear indignant.

"Sod that! I need you here, demolishing these forts. But if you ever catch him again, don't wait till morning—shoot him on sight." And with that, Vernon stabbed an angry finger toward the harbor.

James took out his spyglass. He looked, blinked—no, it wasn't possible. Five seamen hung over the side of the *Burford* with buckets of paint, and while they had made good progress, the words *Captain Jack Sparrow Wuz Here* were still distinctly visible.

10 February, 1740

"There's to be a party next week," said Elizabeth, jabbing her needle through the linen. "In honor of the taking of Portobello, of course."

"Mm." James gazed around at the tree canopy, at the birds flashing across gaps of sunlight. Portobello had capitulated nearly two months ago, but the fortifications had taken weeks to demolish, and a storm had scattered the fleet as it returned to Jamaica. James had come straight to Elizabeth after reaching home, starved for civilized company.

"The Widow Daintree will be there," said Elizabeth.

James looked back at her. "Are you implying what I think you're implying? Because if you are, I would remind you that the Widow Daintree is nearly twice my age."

She smiled. "I'm told men like a woman with a bit of experience."

"Mrs. Turner!" James blushed from collar to scalp. "For heaven's sake."

Elizabeth held up the embroidery hoop. "What do you think?"

A row of red flowers meandered drunkenly across a plain field. "It's beautiful," said James.

"You are such an awful liar." Elizabeth grinned and returned to her needle.

"It's never been my strong suit." James leaned on his hand and watched Elizabeth's delicate fingers stab and pull at her work.

"Speaking of which—" She looked up and pursed her lips with suppressed amusement. "I hear Jack Sparrow escaped again."

James groaned. "You *would* choose my one failure in the midst of a great success. Did you even listen to the rest, or were the words 'Jack Sparrow' the only ones you heard?"

Elizabeth merely stitched on. After another few minutes, she held up the hoop again. Little green leaves now adorned the flowers.

"Exquisite," said James.

"Oh—" Elizabeth set the embroidery aside. "I nearly forgot. I have something for you."

She went into the house and came back with a book. James accepted it. "What's this?"

"A friend sent me a crate of books. I didn't have any use for this one, but it seemed the sort of thing you'd like."

James opened the cover. It was Vegetius's *De Re Militari*. He laughed. "This is the sort of thing you imagine I have on my bedside table?"

"I might have kept it for myself, but I don't read Latin."

"I suppose the other books in the box were exciting tales of pirates and brigands."

"Well—yes." She shrugged. "There were a few novels, too."

"About pirates and brigands."

"Castaways, actually."

James leafed through the book. He probably wouldn't read it—his Latin wasn't good enough for him to read with much pleasure—but it would look nice on his shelf. He flipped through the pages

to see if Vegetius had written anything about navies. As he turned the pages, the signatures parted to a section entitled *Praecepta Belli Navalis*. He read the first paragraph, then skipped down. At the bottom, someone had made a note in pencil.

In misspelled Latin, it said, *For the King's treasure from Panama, try the customs-house at Chagres.*

He looked quickly up at Elizabeth. She had returned to her work and her face was quite free of any secret knowledge. When Sparrow had given her this message to convey, she must have done it in ignorance. It was clever, actually—to whom else of her acquaintance would she give a Latin text on military tactics? There she sat, still believing him and Sparrow to be mortal enemies, when she'd just helped them conspire.

For a moment, he longed to tell her. How he would be congratulated, how stroked and made over—how his stock with her would soar. For this reason alone, he could not bear to do it. While it hurt to be rejected for being the man he was, it would hurt even more to be praised for betraying himself. What he'd done for Sparrow, and now this conspiracy—it was abominable. But he wanted the help Sparrow could give him more than he wanted virtue. All in all, he was one thin rationalization from becoming a pirate himself.

"Thank you," James smiled, clutching the book on his lap. "And do thank your friend for me, as well."

"Oh, I will." This time, her eyes were full of schemes, and for once, he didn't feel excluded by them. Indeed, he felt several steps ahead.

24 March, 1740

The town of Chagres, huddled on a marshy flat at the mouth of the Chagres river fifty miles to windward of Portobello, was a cluster of rotting houses, a grand and dilapidated governor's mansion, a few aging fortifications, and one very fat customs-house.

Between the rows of stuffed barrels, the clerk rustles his papers with a flourish of self-importance. "Of cocoa: 2,892 ceroons, 2 butts and 5 hogsheads. Of Jesuit's bark: 1,240 ceroons, 4 butts, 4 hogsheads and 12 puncheons. Of wool: 327 bales. Total plate and specie valued at 20,000 pounds." He looked up expectantly, hoping to be congratulated for this bounty.

Vernon nodded. "Norrington, I want all of that aboard the *Norwich* and the *Falmouth*. I'll leave you a few of the frigates; the rest of us will put to sea tomorrow. We'll have a look into Cartagena, to see if we can discover whether they really plan to keep the treasure fleet shut up there all year. Meanwhile, you're to demolish the fortifications as quickly as you can, then join us back at Jamaica. Hopefully you'll do a quicker job of it than you did at Portobello. Understood?"

"Aye, sir," sighed James.

"Good." Vernon smiled unctuously. "Congratulations, Governor Norrington."

Vernon had a remarkable ability to make an honorific sound like an insult.

"Admiral!" cried a reedy voice from behind them, and they turned. James wrinkled his nose. A ragged man with a messy blond queue and dark red rings under his eyes approached them, bowing. "They jus' told me. Much obliged, sir, much obliged."

Incredulous, James watched as Vernon smiled and shook the man's hand. James had seen him

briefly earlier; his name was Lowther. "A capital thing you did for us, young fellow," Vernon was saying. He was never happier than when he was flattering someone too stupid or naïve to defend himself. "All of England thanks you. A pardon was the least we could do."

"I reckon I can return there now," said the man, glowing, "but seein' as I'm a man of the sea, I've half a mind to join the service meself."

"An excellent idea!" said Vernon. "An outstanding seaman such as yourself deserves a place of honor. Let me see about getting you a lieutenant's commission."

James gaped.

"Oh, sir!" The red-rimmed eyes expanded. "Much, much obliged, sir!"

Vernon seemed genuinely flattered. "Think nothing of it, young man. Go find my secretary; he'll see to it."

When Lowther had left, James turned to Vernon, incredulous. "Sir, do you really think that providing us with soundings for the mouth of the river justifies a royal commission in his Majesty's service? The man is a *pirate*, for heaven's sake."

"Not anymore he isn't," said Vernon. "We'd never have been able to take this place without those soundings. It's high time you learned: if you don't reward merit, you'll never have your men's respect."

"It wasn't the reward I was questioning, it was the merit," James muttered, but Vernon had walked ahead, stopping to tap his shoe against a barrel like a woman squeezing fruits at a market. "There must be plenty more on the way," he said as though James were right beside him. "Where's the cochineal? The leather? The indigo? Where's the damn silver from Peru? It must be loaded on mules on the far side of the isthmus, waiting for us to go away. I'd press in, but I don't trust Newton to do the job..."

"Sir," said James sternly, "I'm concerned about that report on Admiral Torres's fleet. Perhaps you should call a council of war."

Vernon turned, surprise on his lumpy face. "And what? Listen to Newton's useless squawks about supplies and reinforcements? Perhaps we could include Swann so he could fill us in on the diplomatic gossip in Lisbon. Norrington, the squadron will be cruising off Cartagena for the next month. If anything is to be learned about the Spanish fleet, we'll learn it. Do your job here and leave the bigger picture to me, am I clear?"

James nodded. "Inimitably, sir."

He spent the rest of the afternoon surveying the forts for the laying of the mines. As the light died, he left the sub-engineers to demolish all the wooden buildings, then hiked up the hill to the Governor's house, where he meant to spend the evening eating cold meat and drinking Spanish wine as he drew up plans for the shafts and galleries and calculated the quantities of the charges. It was easier than the work at Portobello, where the forts had been built on solid rock, but it was not work he was used to, and he preferred to do it away from critical eyes. None of the officers had opted to come ashore, so James would be alone in his governorship, the lord of an empty house.

James stepped into the great hall, with its high windows and long oak dining table. That would suit fine for his drawings and his supper. As he unrolled his plans on the table, he heard sounds down the corridor, like mice in the walls—his steward, adjusting to the new environment. A charge went

off in the distance, rattling the window panes, and James stood and listened to the silence that followed. He was ruler of this empty, swampy place. How proud his father would be.

At the end of the hall was a cedar sacristy chest, its dark polished front undulating like a sea swell. That would certainly go well in his office—if he were an archbishop. He strode to it and ran his hand over its finish, wondering what arbitrary value someone in England might assign it when calculating the total prize. He knelt and pulled out a drawer.

So this was where they kept the good silver. He picked up a knife with an intricately scalloped handle and decided Sparrow was right about him—he was just a pirate after all. He shouldn't have been so shocked; what were wars but state-sponsored piracy? He lifted the cloth under the silver to see if there was more underneath.

That was odd. The cloth rested on wood, yet from the outside, the drawer was clearly deeper. He felt around the edges inside and pulled up a thin panel. The silver clattered into the compartment beneath.

He stared. If he *was* a pirate, at least he was a very good one. Gold and rich inlaid jewels glinted in the bottom of the drawer. It couldn't be anything else: the crown and scepter of a Spanish viceroyalty. Apart from their value as symbols, the metal and stones were worth a fortune. Never mind that they shouldn't be there; there was no viceroy at muddy little Chagres. Did the Spanish keep spare sets? He lifted them out and turned them over in his hands. His salary for a decade wouldn't buy these objects. But they were just more metal to load onto the ships for condemnation, to wind up as prize-money dispersed among hundreds of men. Unless Vernon did something special with them—for himself, of course.

Well, Vernon wasn't there. With a glance around the hall, James took off his hat and fitted the crown atop his head. He waited for a moment. Nothing, except for a feeling of an approaching neck ache. Gold was a poor choice for something one would be wearing on one's head. He gazed at the scepter. Perhaps he wasn't a pirate; this gaudy thing didn't move him at all.

"You're even more ambitious than I thought."

He spun toward the voice, dislodging the crown so that it slid to one side of his head. Blushing, he snatched it off. In the open window, Sparrow crouched, grinning broadly.

"Get down," James snapped. "There are soldiers everywhere."

"And yet you are alone." Sparrow leapt off the sill. "I was hoping to get you alone, Commodore."

"I'm afraid you'll have to call me 'Governor' now." James twirled the scepter and smiled humorlessly.

"Gov'nor!" Sparrow laughed. "Now then, well done!"

"Well done indeed." James scowled. "So, what has cursed me with your malodorous company?"

Sparrow looked sour. "I see you're the same as ever. I'd hoped what with our no longer bein' in competition for the treasure fleet—"

"Your fault, incidentally."

"—that you might be a bit less of a bastard."

James tried not to smile. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Believe it or not," Sparrow huffed, "I'm here to help. Though I'm havin' second thoughts now."

"Help?" James's eyes gleamed. "How?"

"Oh"—Sparrow examined his nails—"just a bit of information that'll get you back where the action is instead of faffin' about blowin' up forts."

James narrowed his eyes. "What do you know?"

"Ah-ah. First..." Sparrow held out his hand.

James glared at it. "Yes?"

Sparrow snapped his fingers. "The regalia, if you please."

"What?" James clutched the objects close. This was uncomfortable, since they were pointy. "These are worth a fortune! If anyone found out I'd—" He glanced around and sighed, then passed them to Sparrow, who took off his hat and made a show of balancing the crown carefully on his matted mop. "I can't imagine how you're going to sell them. Now what have you heard?"

"Only that Don Sebastián de Eslava, the recently appointed viceroy, has landed at Puerto Rico and is fitting out for the final leg of his voyage to Cartagena."

"You're certain of this?" James asked. Sparrow nodded. "You have seen the ships with your own eyes?" Sparrow nodded again, and James paced away. "I must tell the Admiral immediately."

"And you must bear the news yourself, naturally." Sparrow winked. "How did my soundings answer, by the way?"

"*Your* soundings? Vernon told me he got them from a pirate called Lowther."

"Aye, that's the fellow. He was desperate for a pardon, poor bugger. Saved me the trouble of a more unreliable means o' conveyance."

"Why, that lying..." James clenched his fists. "Vernon made him a lieutenant just now, can you believe it? A pirate! He'll be commanding the fleet before the week is up."

"There, there, jealousy does not become you, Commodore." Sparrow fumbled the scepter and bowed. "I mean, Gov'nor."

There were footsteps out in the corridor. Without apparent worry, Sparrow ducked beneath the table a moment before James's steward entered the room, bearing a cold capon and two kidneys. "Found this in the cellar, sir," he said, holding up a bottle.

James watched the man lay out the spread amid the scattered mess of drawings. When the steward had gone, Sparrow slithered up into a chair. "Say, Gov'nor, I've been sleepin' rough in the jungle... been positively days since I've eaten..."

James sat down. "Just keep your filthy fingers off the bits I'm going to eat."

Sparrow pulled a leg off the capon. He was still wearing the crown. "So." He tore off a messy bite. "How're the Turners?"

James took the other chicken leg. "Fine. Jolly splendid." He glared. "Why don't you just ask them yourself?"

Sparrow chuckled merrily, watching him. "Still resentful of fair Elizabeth's choice, eh?"

"We are not discussing this, you reprobate."

Sparrow clucked and shook his head. "She has no idea how you felt about her, does she?"

James narrowed his eyes.

"I'll take that as a no. And is that past or present tense?"

James glared. "What part of 'we are not discussing this' wasn't clear?"

"I was doin' pretty well for a minute there, though, wasn't I?" Sparrow's eyes glittered. "You know, Norrington, I get the feeling you want to talk, but you're just so...bottled up."

"I am simply capable of controlling myself. Not that I'd expect you to—"

"You consider runnin' out in the middle of a wedding to be controllin' yerself?"

James dropped his chicken leg. "How did you hear about that?"

"Not many folks missed the man in uniform stumblin' over them to get out of the pew with a hand clapped over his mouth."

"I was ill. I'd been out of sorts all week." James scowled. "Everyone seems to think I was overcome by emotion, but that's nonsense."

"Oh, certainly." Sparrow grinned. "You've been most cruelly misrepresented."

They chewed a few more bites in silence.

"I have to admit," said Sparrow, "I was surprised when I heard what happened on that parapet after I left."

James rolled his eyes. "'Left'—you make it sound so deliberate. And why were you surprised?"

"Let's just say I thought you were piratical enough to take what you wanted when you had the chance."

"Maybe I am." James pushed away the chicken and drew over the kidneys. "But I wanted something that could not be taken, as it happened."

"What, a woman's love? You'd be surprised."

"Just try," James sighed, "in your depraved mind, to understand the concept of honor for a single moment, Sparrow."

Sparrow shrugged as though admitting a point, but he added quietly, "It's honor what brought me here today, don't forget."

"Hardly." James sniffed. "You have an agenda, as always."

"Honor and agendas are not mutually exclusive." Sparrow sucked a fingertip and smirked like he'd uttered a great truth. "You think you have this whole honor thing cornered, Gov'nor. Just wait a bit. Maybe you'll learn something."

James didn't bother responding. Sometimes that was the only way. He had no idea why he was talking to Sparrow at all, except that he hadn't had a real conversation in weeks. Not that this one qualified either.

Sparrow resumed his campaign on neutral ground. "So," he said through a mouthful, "the Admiral's awfully proud of himself."

James accepted the offer of peace. "I would say he had a right to be," he replied, "had the two towns we've taken not been defended by a ragged handful of men in tumbling-down forts and a leaky ship or two." James reached over to the capon and acquired a wing, relieved to be done with Sparrow's prying. "I fear what Vernon's overconfidence will do to us when we encounter their real strength."

"You refer, of course, to the supposed battle squadron on its way from Spain."

"And to Don Blas. Vernon thinks the Spanish are idiots, but Don Blas must not be underestimated."

"You've met *el Medio Hombre*, I take it."

"I have. He's dangerous, and Vernon doesn't see it. He's so impressed with himself—Portobello, Chagres, Cartagena next! Then on to Havana! He doesn't see that the Spanish have not even bothered to put up a fight. Don Blas understands one thing very well: when to cut his losses."

"He must, considering how much of himself he's lost."

"And he's still alive, isn't he? He'll burn down his city if that keeps us from taking it."

"I've been wonderin'," said Sparrow. "You're cleverer than Vernon—any fool can see that. So why are you still takin' orders from him?"

James blinked. "He's my commanding officer. I have no choice."

"Isn't it your duty to make sure the most intelligent people are makin' the decisions?"

"My duty is to maintain and respect the chain of command."

"And if people die because of it?"

"Mutiny will not save anybody's life."

"And what if Vernon were to, say, meet with an accident?"

"Bite your tongue, Sparrow!" James pushed away his food. "I would sooner slit my own throat than stoop to such a crime. It's treasonous even to think it. Even more treasonous than allowing you to escape!"

Sparrow laughed. "I've seen a lot of things, but you're the first man I ever met who put the screws to himself for lettin' a man live."

There were more footsteps in the corridor, and Sparrow dove back under the table just as the steward returned.

"Forgot the plum duff, sir," he said, putting it down on top of a plan.

As soon as the man had left, Sparrow's head appeared over the edge of the table, eyes fixed on the

pudding. James pulled it out of reach, but Sparrow continued to rest his chin on his arms, eyes big and pleading. With his matted hair gathered at odd angles from his head, he looked like nothing so much as a begging spaniel.

James sighed. "Fine. But can you at least use silverware?" He pointed toward the sacristy chest. "Honestly, one would think you were starving."

Sparrow retrieved a filigreed fork and devoured the better part of the pudding, then leaned back with his feet up, rubbing his belly and watching James eat the rest.

"You're disgusting," said James.

"Yet I'm happy," said Sparrow, and belched. "Let that be a lesson."

"Out of curiosity," said James once he'd swallowed the last of the pudding, "what was originally in that customs-house that will not appear on our books?"

Sparrow grinned. "You don't want to know."

"I shouldn't have given you that regalia," James sighed.

"We both need a reason to stay in the game," Sparrow smiled, picking his teeth with his fork, "but we can always cash out if the rules don't suit our fancy."

"So," said James, "what secret will you sell me next?"

"What sort do you want?"

James narrowed his eyes. "Anything that will prevent Vernon from keeping me in the dark."

"Well, Mr. Second-In-Command—I'm sorry, *Gov'nor* Second-In-Command—the question is, what do I get in return?"

James shrugged. "That's for you to work out."

"How 'bout my ship?"

"Again, Sparrow, that's—"

"Can't you call me 'Captain'?" Sparrow jerked his feet down from the table. "I've been very good about callin' you 'Gov'nor'."

James rolled his eyes. "I don't even call Gillette 'Captain' in private."

"Ah," said Sparrow, lifting his brow, "does this then mean we have achieved the rarefied heights of *friendship*?"

"Oh, please." James pursed his lips. "*Captain* Sparrow."

Sparrow blinked. "I do think I've just been rejected. How ironic." He shook his head. "Your loss, though. Captain Jack Sparrow is a good friend to have. He'll even let you win at cards occasionally."

"I'd know better than to play cards with you."

"Just promise you'll look for my ship as much as the requirements of your bloody stupid service

allow, an' I'll keep my ears open. If I find I'm puttin' in more than I'm gettin' back, we'll have a little talk. This spyin' business is a two-way street, you know. If you wanna stay a step ahead of that fat fool Vernon—"

"All right, all right!" James pushed away the dish and pulled a drawing into its place. "We have an agreement, which regardless of my personal opinion of you, I intend to honor."

"Jus' makin' sure." Sparrow grinned and stood. "I'll leave you to your doodles, Gov'nor."

"They're plans," James snapped.

"Whatever—just little bits of paper that men get inordinately excited about. Speakin' of which, here's one more." He handed James a scrap with a scribble on the back. "The means for how we'll next communicate. Now, farewell. Keep an eye out for my ship."

James scowled. "Do not doubt my word. *Captain Sparrow.*"

As quietly as a shadow, Sparrow vanished through the open window. James glanced at the latitude and longitude on the scrap of paper, then slipped it into his coat. For a while, he sat in the hall with his drawings and the remains of his supper and listened to the silence, which seemed louder in the wake of Sparrow's chatter. A good friend to have, indeed. But one thing could be said for him: he was never dull.

In which a partnership is surprisingly successful

2 April, 1740

Waiting for Vernon to finish his business on deck, James sat and stared at the open reports spread over the Admiral's desk. After another minute, he stood and went around to the other side, where he read the top page. As soon as he saw what it was, he took it up and scanned it quickly: it was a report of a cruising frigate's recent visit to Havana.

Vernon's footsteps warned him and he put the papers down just in time.

"Ah, Norrington. Everything in Chagres is taken care of, I trust?"

"Yes, sir. I have also received some important intelligence that I thought to bring to you personally."

"Ah?"

"Eslava, the viceroy of New Grenada, has landed in Puerto Rico and will leave for Cartagena any day."

"Excellent!" Vernon's eyes glittered. "What a blow his capture would be. It would certainly keep the diplomats in Lisbon busy for a spell. Anything else?"

James cleared his throat. "A letter arrived for you in Chagres a day after you left. It's—from Don Blas de Lezo."

Vernon took the letter from James and broke the seal. Then he squinted. "Oh, blast it all. It's in Spanish. The whoreson bastard sent me a letter in *Spanish*. Who does he think I am?" He tossed the letter down. "Fetch someone who can read this thing, will you?"

"I speak Spanish, sir."

"You do?" Vernon frowned. "What the hell for? Oh, of course, your father. Well, here—what does that coward Lezo have to say for himself?"

James skimmed the letter. He opened his mouth, then closed it.

"Well?" Vernon snarled. "What's it say?"

James cleared his throat. "*To his Excellency Admiral Edward Vernon of His Britannic Majesty's Royal Fleet—*"

"Skip all that!"

James pursed his lips. "*If I had been in Portobello,*" he read coldly, "*your Excellency would not have assaulted the fortresses of my sovereign King with such impunity, because I would have supplied the valor the defenders lacked and silenced your boasting...*"

James didn't bother looking at Vernon, whose silent fury he could feel across the room.

Eventually, Vernon said, "I'll show that bloody Spaniard what boasting is." He was bright red.

"We'll see how he's talking when twelve thousand British soldiers land on his town, eh? We'll see where his valor is then!"

"Sir," said James, knowing he was talking into the wind, "you must realize that Don Blas is being intentionally provocative."

"Yes." Vernon was breathing hard. "Yes, I'm sure he is. What kind of *fool* would provoke the greatest fighting force on Earth, Norrington? What kind of *idiot* is this Lezo that he thinks it to his advantage to *provoke* me?"

"I'm merely offering perspective, sir," sighed James. He read the letter again. Don Blas had called his own men cowards. Again, that willingness to cut away a part of him that did not help him. And Vernon was in a choleric fit that would produce any number of wasteful gestures. Don Blas knew what he was doing.

"Take *Windsor* and *Greenwich* with you," said Vernon softly. "The viceroy will land at Santa Marta before he goes to Cartagena, so you can catch him there."

"Sir, that is right on the old treasure galleon route. If he has any sense, he'll steer far to leeward of Santa Marta and then beat upwind to Cartagena without ever coming within a hundred miles—"

"Are you capable of just accepting an order and following it?" Vernon snapped. The chair groaned as he dropped into it and picked up a report. "I know where the treasure galleon route goes and I say he will land at Santa Marta, understood?"

James pressed his mouth shut and nodded.

10 April, 1740

The moon carved a yellow chip out of the deepening sky, and Venus shone like a polished jewel. James reached for her.

Thumbing through his lunar tables, he ran his calculations once, twice, and a third time. The noon and afternoon sights placed them on a steady latitude. Santa Marta, if they could have seen it, was southeast-half-east. They were exactly where they were supposed to be—if they were supposed to be in exactly the wrong place.

A mile away, the *Greenwich* darkened the gleaming trail of the setting sun. Captain Wyndham was probably taking his lunar sight too, and probably thinking the same thing—but Wyndham didn't have the freedom with Vernon that James had. He was tangled in the servile threads of patronage—not that James wasn't, but James had other interest at the Admiralty, and a reputation for cheek that Vernon indulged. And Vernon wasn't here. Right now, James was in command.

The wind was freshening and backing around to the east. He made a decision. "Mr. Groves," he said, "signal to the squadron. A new bearing of west-north-west."

Groves hesitated. "Sir?"

"Was I not clear?" James snapped. "Signal the squadron, if you please."

"Aye, sir."

The signal broke out overhead. After a minute, it appeared above the *Greenwich*, where it would be seen by the *Windsor*, running down the chain toward the western horizon. As night fell, three ships quietly turned their heads toward the wind.

"Good. Now bring it down to the horizon. Handsomely...keep your hand steady there, I know it's difficult..."

A cluster of midshipmen hid Gillette's body, but not his piercing voice, which was remarkably free of his usual impatience. Everyone's sextants followed the sun, and shortly, ten logbooks were out as ten pencils scribbled down figures. Then Gillette herded the boys off the quarterdeck like a housewife with a flock of hens.

"We made less leeway in the night than we'd feared," said Gillette once he'd returned.

James already knew this, having taken his sight along with the young gentlemen. He was about to say as much when Groves cried out, "The *Greenwich* is signaling, sir!" The lieutenant squinted and shielded his eyes, "*Sails to leeward!*"

A thrill went through James. "Take in topsails!" he shouted. *Greenwich* had already done the same; there was always the chance their quarry hadn't seen their sails above the horizon yet. "Return her signal," he went on, containing himself: "*Give chase.*"

The *Greenwich* replied with bearings, and the decks burst to life as Gillette set a new heading. Once they received the signal that their chase had spotted them and changed course, they set all their canvas. Royals and studdingsails broke out as James scurried up the mast as far as the topgallant cap, where he scanned the horizon with his glass. All he could make out was the *Windsor*, six miles off. He climbed further, knees shaking a little—the last time he'd been this high, he was six inches shorter and his feet rather smaller. It was worth a bit of nerves. He could now make out the white specks, still hull down on the horizon, sixteen miles away. "Everything you have, Captain Gillette!" he cried. He couldn't wait to see Vernon's face.

An hour later, the sails were visible from the masthead. The air on deck was still as the ship ran dead downwind. They were driving the viceroy—and who else could it be?—away from Cartagena, and if he turned off his course at all, they would close the arc and catch him quickly. Still, the *Dauntless* was not a swift sailer. "Clew up the main course," he said, and climbed back up to the masthead for another look. "Get more out of that foresail."

Two hours later, the ships were hull down again. "What more can we do, sir?" asked Gillette, watching them forlornly.

"We can go to Cartagena," said James. "They shall have to alter their course for it sooner or later, and we can cut them off there."

As evening fell, Cartagena lay off their larboard bow, and there was no sign of the viceroy. They sailed down the coast, passing the low spit of land separating them from Cartagena's inner harbor, and from the masthead, Groves called down, "Twenty sail in the harbor, sir!"

Lezo's squadron accounted for seven, the treasure fleet for nine—the rest had to be the viceroy and his escort. All safely ensconced in the harbor.

He sighed. "Captain Gillette, take us home."

They did not go straight home, but instead put in for the evening at the bay of Playa Grande, ten miles north of the city. While his men were busy cutting firewood, James crept off.

He was thoroughly winded by the time he reached the top of the bluff, his hands caked and his knees stained with red soil. As he pulled himself over the crest, he glanced down the road that ran by not twenty feet away, then crept into some bushes where he could reconnoiter the thing

properly.

Just around a curve under a hibiscus bush was a little shrine. A woman knelt in front of it with a rosary, mumbling with head bent toward the plaster figure of the Virgin Mary leaning sympathetically to one side, as though listening. James waited, sweating in his dark wool coat as insects buzzed around his neck. Then the woman placed a bit of bread at the base of the lime-washed cross, got to her feet, and disappeared around the bend.

He waited another minute to be sure she was gone, then hurried over to the shrine. He drew a single piece of paper from his coat and read it over again. It said simply, *I saw an interesting report recently. Try Havana.* He folded it and tucked it behind the Virgin's patient form.

A thrill ran through him as his fingers met another piece of paper. Carefully, he pulled it out and observed the loopy hand, then withdrew into the bushes, where he crouched and read it. It said:

Dear Governor, a few letters crossed my desk recently—well, not proper to say "crossed" or even "desk"—but they reminded me of you. Mentioned a great deal of ships fitting out in Brest as well as Ferrol—quite more than you'd ordinarily expect this time of year, and the prose was liberally peppered with names like "le Marquis d'Antin" and "le Chevalier de Roche-Allard"—all gentlemen you know, I'd wager. Oh, and your friend Torres—or was it Lezo you were cozy with? Can't keep your Spanish admiral boyfriends straight, love. Sorry I won't be presenting you with these interesting letters, but I didn't have time to copy them, and anyway, res ipsa loquitur, I think you'll agree. Didn't see any dates amid the lexical profusion, but from the way they were carrying on, I'd venture that those fleets will be swimming by August. Oh, and by the way, there's a spy in your camp. No bloody idea who it is—the Spanish just call him "el paisano"—but I'm working on it. Lots of love, all the best, wish you were here, CJS.

Heart pounding, James tucked the letter into his coat. So the French had joined the game now. He wondered if Vernon already knew. Vernon told him nothing, which was why he needed Sparrow. Forgetting his failure with the viceroy, he prepared to skid and tumble his way back down to the harbor, where Gillette was undoubtedly waiting.

1 June, 1740

Jack had never missed his friends as much as now. They were scattered to the four winds, presumably—he'd heard nothing of them despite his inquiries. Hopefully they were scraping out livings somewhere on the Spanish Main, free of his dangerous presence. How he could have used their ingenuity now, their wit and loyalty and liveliness.

He wiped his brow and struggled with the fishing net, which had got itself looped around both his foot and his head so that whenever he took a step, he jerked himself backward like a horse on a bit. He had never fished a day in his life and he had no idea what to do with the thing, but a little humiliation was better than being recognized. Havana was crawling with acquaintances, bad ones, some of whom he'd seen recently. At times, it was a curse having such an unforgettable face. He unhooked his foot and sat down heavily on the gunwale of his little beached boat, his bare back cooking under the afternoon sun, and stared forlornly across a short stretch of water toward the careening wharf.

They'd struck her topmasts and taken out her ballast to heave her down. She was rolled over on her side in the shallow water like a beached whale, or perhaps an enormous cow giving birth, only far more graceful. At least they were taking care of her. How he longed to run over and touch her side.

He had to get closer. He slipped his boat back into the water and paddled slowly toward the wharf,

acting casual, praying that his disguise was sound. He'd spotted Abaroa the day before, along with one or two Spanish Navy officers who would certainly remember him. For now, it looked to be just workmen on the wharf. They'd be too busy to wonder at the inept fishermen who wasn't catching any fish.

"You!" shouted the foreman of the gang. "Away from here!"

Jack paddled to a stop and quickly reversed. The man turned away and walked back up the wharf toward the capstan-house, and Jack waited till he was out of sight to paddle around the side of the ship where he'd be out of the work gang's sight. He slipped his boat between the pilings of the wharf, then grabbed onto the wooden supports and hoisted himself up.

For half an hour, he sat in the crook of a support and listened to the pounding of feet overhead. When there had been no footsteps for several minutes, he made his move. Slippery as a fish, he slithered up the side of the wharf and made for the overhang of the capstan-house, where he flattened himself against the wall.

There were voices nearby. Jack shrank as far into the wall as he could when two figures stopped not ten feet away. If they turned their heads, they'd see him. He held very still.

"The Navy shall buy her?" It was Abaroa.

"She's old, but in fine shape. His Majesty can always use one more thirty-six-gun frigate, pirate ship or not."

"How long till she's swimming again?"

"The dockyard can't say. Once her hull and timbers are seaworthy, there's still the new masts to step and any number of small matters, and the yard must attend to the squadron first. Three months at least, if they work quickly."

When the men had gone, Jack slid down into a squat. She was right there—he could run out on the wharf and touch her if he liked—and yet she couldn't have been farther away. Even if she were afloat in three months' time, she'd be a Spanish Navy ship by then, and Havana was the Navy's principle base. He might as well try and pluck a diamond from between Queen Isabella's royal teats.

It didn't seem so long ago that Jack had stolen that pretty gun-brig from under Norrington's nose. It had been so simple: two ships, two pirates, one arrogant Navy commander, one clever ruse. Havana was presently home to a squadron of nineteen ships and at least 10,000 sailors and officers. Jack was good, but he wasn't that good. He heard their voices again—Booth and Deadwater, Suah, even Norrington, all telling him that his time was over. There was no place for him in the world. Only Suah had offered anything constructive; he'd suggested that Jack turn English. Only the English had the freedom to take what they wanted anymore, boorish conquerors that they were.

Jack got to his feet and peered around the side of the capstan-house. The *Pearl's* mighty black bulk towered above the wharf. If the English were to attack Havana, they might create enough chaos to give Jack a chance to work his old magic. Norrington had even promised to help him do it, and Norrington was the kind of idiot who meant what he said on principle. Jack needed those silly principles now, because someone had to convince Admiral Vernon to attack this place.

As dusk fell, the men working on the *Pearl's* hull left one by one, and Jack ran out onto the wharf. He reached up to one of the massive cables reeved to her masts, as taut and solid as a tree trunk. She was so beautiful, even stripped and careened. He hated how the careening strained her knees

and futtocks. She was just a ship to the Spanish, but he could feel her timbers complaining like the bones of his own body. Or maybe that was just him getting old. They'd both been through a lot, him and his *Pearl*. Perhaps they both needed to transform to survive. He gazed up at her ornate rails and ancient figurehead, the familiar shape of her fine bows and sturdy keel. Even unrigged and stripped to a hulk, she was the same *Pearl*. Maybe the same would be true for him.

He laid a hand on the cable. "I'll be back for you, darling," he said, and ran off into the night.

22 October, 1740

With two enemy fleets abroad, life in the squadron had changed. Jamaica had succumbed to hysteria over possible invasion, and Vernon had shut the squadron up in Port Royal for fear of the enemy's greater force. For weeks, talk had been of nothing but Admiral Torres joining Lezo at Cartagena and the Marquis d'Antin's arrival in the Caribbean announcing France's entry into the war. Then the panic had faded with no new disasters to sustain it, and boredom had forced everyone into other concerns.

Bearing a saddle bag full of papers, James marched to the edge of town where the Turner home lay. On the front step, he checked his watch. It was a full day's ride to Port Antonio by the coastal roads and he was already afraid he would need to stop for the night in Bath. But Elizabeth had a way of issuing imperious summonings that could not be argued with, and he feared her more than he feared the impatience of the Port Antonio Navy Office.

"Elizabeth—" James stepped into the garden, "—I really must protest. I must leave for Port Antonio before noon, and the tone of your note was really quite—"

"Oh, here he is." Elizabeth stood up and drew forward a plump, fair-haired girl in a straw bonnet. "This is Miss Alice Claringbold, Commodore. And her brother, Tom." She snagged an equally fair young man by the elbow.

Presented for inspection, Tom Claringbold made an apologetic bow, and his sister smiled awkwardly, round cheeks turning pink. She was really quite beautiful, just the sort of woman James's mother would have delighted to see him with. Her nose was freckled and her ears had flushed a deep salmon. Feeling responsible for their embarrassment, James attempted a reassuring smile. "I'm pleased to make your—"

"You will be escorting the Claringbolds to Port Antonio," said Elizabeth, sitting down again. "The coach leaves in an hour."

"But Mrs. Turner, I'm not taking a coach, I'm riding alone—I don't have time to—"

"Do you realize how many bandits infest the mountains? And with the war, could you in good conscience allow these people to travel without an escort trained in armed defense?"

"I hardly think the Spanish are going to waylay us in the middle of our own island," James grumbled.

"Commodore, you're acting like this is up for discussion. I've sent for the rest of your things to be put aboard the coach already."

"The rest of my—" James sat, knees drawn together. "Well—" He glanced at the Claringbolds, who looked equally overwhelmed.

"Lovely." Elizabeth folded her hands and smiled.

This was not the first time Elizabeth had thrown him together with a woman. She always picked attractive, intelligent girls, for which he was grateful—not so much for the girls themselves but for the proof that Elizabeth thought highly enough of him to bother. In this, he was willfully missing the point, but his friendships with these women never lasted anyway.

In the coach, the Claringbolds were shy and awed, which didn't help the conversation. They and Mrs. Turner had played together as children, they explained after James prodded. Their father had sold his land in Jamaica and bought more on Barbados, but once war was declared, he sent his children back where he thought they'd be safe. It had been lovely so far, they declared, and they were now on their way to visit a cousin on the north coast.

"Commodore, do you think the Spanish will invade Jamaica?" asked the girl, her pale eyes round.

"Oh, we shall meet the Spanish at sea long before that," James smiled. Like a physician asked to dispense free medical advice, James was forever being examined about the war.

"But surely there's also the French," put in Mr. Claringbold.

"Again," said James, wishing that people thought him capable of other topics, "we shall bring the war to them, if at all."

"Oh, dear." Miss Claringbold put a gloved hand to her mouth. "Is that why you're going to Port Antonio?"

"My trip to Port Antonio is administrative." James dug around in his saddle bag for his mail. "The naval base there is falling out of use, and we are moving a quantity of dockyard stores back to Port Royal."

"I see." It was hard to miss the moment her interest stopped being genuine.

James flipped through his letters and found one that made his heart skip a beat. He tore it open.

My dear Norry, it said. Can you believe it? We shall shortly be together again...

James knew the hand as well as his own. Eighteen years ago, he'd climbed aboard a frigate at Spithead with a sea-chest and an attitude, and two master's mates had promptly stuffed him face-first into the chicken coop. The Captain's younger brother had hauled him out and picked the straw and chicken mess out of his hair, then brushed down his coat in the midshipmen's berth. For the rest of the commission, James and Lord Aubrey Beauclerk had barely left each other's sides.

You've no doubt heard that Ogle has been advanced to rear-admiral and is returning to the West Indies to reinforce Vernon. I'll be along too, and wait till you see the beauty they gave me out of Deptford this year: a slim seventy with a high cutwater and the fastest lines you've ever seen. She's the Prince Frederick, but her figurehead looks more like my grandmother than it does the Prince of Wales...

Since Beauclerk's grandmother was Nell Gwynne, this was in fact a compliment. James smiled. Beauclerk was a remarkable creature—he carried romance and excitement around with him, and even more remarkably, he carried around the ability to make James *like* romance and excitement.

Picturing the ship and her captain's face, James forgot all about the Claringbolds, who had fallen into their own low conversation. When he returned to the present, he found himself outside their quiet sibling confidence, and turned to watching the sugar plantations crawl by.

The coach wound along the coast. Around two o'clock, rapid hoofbeats came up behind them, and

a grey horse galloped past. James looked out just in time to see the horse's Army livery and the rider's blue coat. An hour later, the coach came upon the grey horse again, and this time her rider was on the ground.

"Thrown a shoe, I'm afraid," they heard the man say to the coach driver. "Mind terribly if I hitch her to the back?"

Shortly, the rider was climbing into the coach.

"Gillette!" James exclaimed. "What on Earth are you doing here?"

"The Admiral had some additional papers for the Naval Officer," said Gillette, settling himself across from the Claringbolds with a quick smile. "I said I'd catch up to you—thought you'd be on horseback. Of course, now I'm stuck going all the way to Port Antonio unless I can get a horse at Bath—but I don't suppose it will be a chore." He sent a shy smile toward Miss Claringbold.

James sighed. Elizabeth was going to kill him.

"...so there we were with swells the size of mountains all round us, tossed up on wave after wave, and then we hear a great *twang!* like the snap of a fiddle string only fifty times as loud, and suddenly the helm is spinning like a pinwheel and the ship is rounding up into the wind with her rudder flapping like a loose shingle. Now, I know it doesn't sound terrifying to a non-sailor, but if a ship rounds up in seas like that, she's in deadly danger from the huge waves pounding on her broadside—the seaman's term is that she has *broached to*, and she'll shortly founder if you don't act quick..."

James settled his head into a corner. If he had been telling this story, it would have sagged under long explanations, understatement, self-reproach and nautical jargon. He had lived an exciting life, but he'd never learned the art of making it exciting for others.

The Claringbolds were chewing their lips, slaves to Gillette's narrative. It wasn't fair. Dull men had been known to marry; maybe Elizabeth knew a girl who preferred dullards—but then, such a girl would bore *him*. If only like could simply be attracted to like in this world. Irritated with all three of his companions, he snugged his head further into the corner and shut his eyes.

At the inn, James freshened up, then ran into the Gillette in the corridor. In addition to changing out of his riding clothes, Gillette had shaved and polished his shoes, and put on a lacy cravat.

"Forgive me for being so forward, sir," he said in a loud whisper, "but where did *she* come from?"

"It was Mrs. Turner's idea," James muttered.

"Oh." Gillette frowned. Elizabeth's pity on James's unmarried state was legendary. "Then of course we'll have to make sure she knows what a hero you are!"

The dining table was crammed with dishes: cottage pie, fresh mountain mullet, bread and cheese, and leg of mutton. Gillette gallantly carved the meat, then shrank back into his seat with an apologetic glance at James.

"Did you know," said Gillette, "that the Commodore is the Navy's youngest commander-in-chief at Jamaica since we took it from the Spanish?"

"Oh!" the Claringbolds exclaimed politely. "Do you know the story of how we captured Jamaica?" asked Miss Claringbold.

Gillette glanced at James again. "Perhaps the Commodore could tell you."

Three heads turned to James. "Of course," he said, and cleared his throat. "Around ninety years ago," he began, "we suffered an embarrassing defeat at Santo Domingo, and so turned to Jamaica to salvage our dignity..."

He was lucky he wasn't Scheherazade, telling stories for his life. There was no way to make this story heroic, and he refused to spew nonsense. He might as well be Jack Sparrow then. The Claringbolds turned to their cottage pie with great interest.

Gillette wouldn't give up. "The Commodore's a modest man," he said, wrangling their attention again, "and so I'll have to tell his stories for him. His attack on Portobello was so magnificent, so *thunderous*—" he caught James's withering look and smiled, "—that the Spanish Governor insisted on surrendering to him instead of the Admiral. We lost our wind and sat bobbing like a boat on a pond while the Spaniards fired on us, but the Commodore is the finest of seamen, and knew exactly what to do..."

Miss Claringbold lit up. "You were there too, were you not, Captain Gillette?"

James tried to convey to Gillette that all hope was lost, and apparently Gillette understood, because he smiled and said, "As a matter of fact, I was."

The pudding came and went. Gillette regaled the Claringbolds with some of James's navigational feats—he seemed to think that ladies loved nothing so much as a man skilled in mathematics—while James let his attention wander. He longed to see Beauclerk, but Sparrow's face drifted through his postprandial consciousness as well, superimposing itself, replacing some features with others. They weren't entirely unlike, those two men. Both were birds of bright plumage, too large for life. So was Elizabeth, come to think of it. He had managed to surround himself with such people, despite how opposite from his own nature they were.

Lying in bed that night, he tugged up the hem of his shirt and pictured Miss Claringbold's round face. Dutifully he progressed to her bosom and peeled away her bodice, feeling a little empty. Still, creamy white breasts had a power over him that even his sad duty to Elizabeth couldn't suppress. He dropped off to sleep with a sated body and a restless mind.

In the morning, the four of them climbed into the coach and started toward the coastal road. The sugar fields grew monotonous, and for long stretches, they rode in silence. At half past noon, they stopped in Manchioneal to collect a new passenger. They were nearly at capacity, so James and Gillette pressed to the sides of the coach as best they could to make space for the stranger.

"*Goede-n-morgen, mijn vrienden!*" A man in a floppy black hat climbed in, and James's blood froze. Sparrow plopped down on the seat nearly in their laps.

"Kindly remove your walking stick from my foot, sir," hissed James. He had no choice but to play along, but no one said he had to be gracious about it.

"*Vergeef me, Kapitein,*" said Sparrow, pitching forward in a bow. His wig was brown this time, teased into a tall toupet with puffs as big as puddings on the side. James wondered where he'd stolen it from. He'd waxed his mustache and beard into little curlicues. Hopefully everyone in the coach was too busy finding him repulsive to see through the disguise. His scent filled James's nostrils—wet hair and tobacco, and something sweeter, opium perhaps. James tried to breathe through his mouth.

Rather than keep silent, as James hoped he would, Sparrow introduced himself to the Claringbolds

as *Heer* Bonifaas van Schoonhoven (the name had undoubtedly been robbed from the same man who had donated the wig) and was shortly convincing Mr. Claringbold on the merits of sunflower futures. He was in high form, and James felt a horrified admiration, not unlike watching the work of a skilled butcher.

"Off course, jou are veery lucky to be travelink vit such brafe soldiers," Sparrow declared to Miss Claringbold, who had been listening to him with appalled attention.

"Oh?" Mr. Claringbold laughed. "We're in no danger from Spaniards here, certainly."

"I speak not off Spanish," said Sparrow, eyes gone wide like an uncle telling a ghost story, "but off pirates!"

"Oh!" Miss Claringbold cried. "Pirates!"

James dropped his face into his hands.

Things went downhill from there. Sparrow wove an epic narrative of what must have been every adventure he'd ever lived or made up. The Claringbolds followed raptly; Miss Claringbold had even forgotten Gillette for the moment. James listened with increasing ire.

Eventually, he could stand it no longer. "*Mister* van Schoonhoven," he snapped, "I would venture to say you have never met a real pirate, because if you had, you would not be filling these children's heads with just the kind of romantic nonsense that has ruined so many naïve and misguided lives!"

With pity, Miss Claringbold said, "But they're only stories, Commodore. We know we shouldn't want to come anywhere near a *real* pirate."

"Good." He folded his arms and looked sternly at her. "I grow tired of protecting people who refuse to see danger when it is staring them in the face!"

Everyone in the carriage fell silent after this outburst. The Claringbolds looked gloomily at their hands—they probably hadn't appreciated being called "children"—and Gillette tried to stifle a smile while staring out the window. Sparrow was grinning openly.

Port Antonio had very little to recommend it; there was nothing there but a half-deserted naval base. Sparrow disappeared immediately, and James helped the Claringbolds find their cousin, then went to keep his own appointment. If he'd been dreading it before, he was positively tempted to skip it now. In the attic of a public house near the edge of town, he knocked on a door and Sparrow opened it, still dressed in his ridiculous wig and hat.

However attractive Norrington may have been when he was angry, his mood threatened Jack's purposes. Jack attempted to pacify him with rum, but the man pushed it away and grumbled. "I've half a mind to hang you up by your ankles after that."

"That's an improvement." Jack took his bottle back. "This time a year ago an' it would've been me neck." They stood on either side of the window, shielding their eyes from the platinum glare on the bay. "Come now, no harm done," said Jack, wincing. He was regretting his decision to bait the man he now had to ask a favor of. "Would some interesting news make it better?"

"It had better be damned interesting."

"In a month's time," said Jack, "a convoy will sail from Puerto Rico—not from any of the ports

you're watching, but from a little nothing town in the Mona Passage. You'd do well to be there."

Norrington's scowl softened. "Very well."

"With that prize, you could buy a house for whatever future Mrs. Commodore you choose." Jack winced again; that hadn't been the best thing to bring up either. "Anyway," he hurried on, "you'll be set up, which means you might consider doin' something for me."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Havana. More specifically, my ship."

Norrington shook his head. "Impossible."

"Imp—" Jack gaped. "Norrington, I have been bloody good to you—"

"I'm not refusing," said Norrington with a scowl, "I'm being realistic. How exactly were you imagining we'd do it?"

Jack shrugged, exasperated. "Everyone knows Vernon's goin' to attack Havana as soon as his reinforcements arrive."

"That is by no means a foregone conclusion. Cartagena is just as likely—since that's where the wealth is, and where the treasure fleet is shut up for the year. Actually, I would say Havana rates a distant second."

"Then perhaps you could urge the Admiral in one direction."

Norrington laughed. "You have the wrong idea if you think I have that kind of influence."

"Well"—Jack threw his hands up—"do *some*thin', mate. They could be paintin' her like an Easter egg as we speak!" He fought the urge to clutch his head. "You owe me, Norrington—"

"Calm down." Norrington rolled his eyes. "If we go to Havana—a decision I will have no part in, I'm afraid—then, fine, as much as I'm able, I will help you get her back. As long as you keep helping me."

"You have my word, Gov'nor."

Norrington had shed his coat and hat and leaned now on the window sill, mopping his brow. Dressed all in white from snowy wig to bleached stockings, he resembled an officious angel—the sort Jack pictured flying around heaven fussing over lists and putting souls in their proper places. Place was a very big thing for Norrington.

"If you want to help us toward Havana," said Norrington, "you could bring me some word on the movements and strength of the French. We must deal with them before we can even think about Havana or Cartagena."

"Consider it done," Jack said, and blinked. He'd come here to demand help, not offer it. They were going to take away his pirate card. Was it merely Norrington's pretty face that kept him from thinking clearly? He'd never had that problem before. He was susceptible to handsome people of both sexes, but historically, it took a face much prettier than Norrington's to distract him from his own interests.

"Say," he went on, unable to resist the temptation to needle Norrington a little more, "who was that

fetching tow-headed piece in the coach?"

"I'll thank you not to refer to the lady as a 'piece', you savage." Norrington paused before relenting. "Her name is Miss Claringbold, and Mrs. Turner thinks I should marry her."

"Marry! Oh"—Jack clasped his hands beneath his chin—"resist, dear Commodore. I know of no man who did not become a shadow of his former self when he married."

"Marriage makes a man responsible for more than just his own well-being," said Norrington, folding his arms, "and while most consider that a joy, I'm sure you'd see it as nothing but a limit upon your indulgences." He narrowed his eyes. "It never occurred to me before, Sparrow, but I'd venture to say that you are a lonely man."

"You're the one who's thrown in with a pretty girl and can't think of aught to do but lecture her on pirates. Then straight away you trade her company for mine!" Jack grinned. "Maybe we deserve each other."

"I know in my heart," said Norrington, "that no matter what wickedness I have committed on this Earth, none of it was so vile as to make me deserve you."

Jack raised his bottle. "The feeling is mutual, Commodore."

7 January, 1741

In the dark of early morning, a faint gray horizon was just coming into being. Around them, the creaking lines and spars and the sloosh of water along wooden sides gave up the presence of nearby ships.

"Do they know we're here?" Gillette wondered. Everyone whispered, as though they'd sailed into the midst of a pod of whales.

"If they do, they don't know what we are," James replied.

The sky grew lighter; the horizon took on a bit of pink. Morning revealed their companions: merchantmen, one on each of their quarters, and another two off their bows, then five ahead.

"In another few minutes, they'll know," said Gillette.

"The ship ahoy!" came a cry in Spanish from the merchantman on their larboard quarter.

"Bring us alongside," said James. When they were within comfortable conversation range, James climbed the rail and said, in cordial Spanish, "Strike your colors, or we shall send you to the bottom. And do it quietly, if you please."

The ship's master turned white and nodded. James sent across a lieutenant with a division of seamen to man her. Half an hour later, he had collected two more ships in this fashion.

"Sir!" cried Gillette. "She's running!" The ship off their larboard bow had set all plain sail and was bearing away.

"It's obvious at this point that we're not Dutch," said James. "Run up our own colors. And see if we can't reach her with the long nines."

Once the first ship had given up the game, the others scattered like hens from a fox. The convoy blossomed with sail and their closely formed line unraveled as each of them made for open sea. In

the distance, their escort had worn ship and was running to their aid. The blast of the *Dauntless's* bow chasers split the morning as James climbed to the foretop, where he watched his shots dash the merchantman's spars away. To windward, his captured prizes were giving chase too. It didn't take long for the fleeing ships to realize their former friends had changed nationalities.

Once they'd crippled their chase's mizzenmast, they left her behind. "She shan't go anywhere," said James. "Crack on, Captain Gillette—get us more out of these sails."

Sun was spilling over the dark hills of Puerto Rico, touching first the streaming pendants of the fleeing ships, then creeping down their masts. James shielded his eyes against the glare. Gillette was adjusting his sail trim with bellowed orders, and the *Dauntless* surged forward while the seven ships ahead split into two ragged columns.

"We shall take the windward ones," said James. "Signal to our captured prizes: *chase to leeward*."

Then a peculiar thing happened. The convoy's escort fired a gun, not at James, but upon the lead ship in the leeward column. Within a minute her fore topmast was gone and the other ships had changed course, bearing away in a panic as the frigate herded them back the way they'd come.

The ships to windward were still escaping up the coast. "More speed," James murmured, and a shot from their bow chaser took down her main topmast. Shortly she slowed and struck her colors. Only one ship remained.

It was a slow chase in light air. The *Dauntless* crawled along, driving the ship toward the point at the top of the bay, keeping her from standing out to sea.

"Sail!" cried the lookout, and James looked—a ship to the southwest, still too far away to identify. He would deal with it later. For now—the gap was closing with the point. The Spaniard turned from the shore and into the *Dauntless's* fire, but it was too late—there was a grinding crunch. The ship was aground.

The frigate was chasing the final merchantman into the southwest, toward the stranger. As this new ship grew larger in James's spyglass, he made out her narrow prow and high cutwater, and her blonde figurehead with a cupid's-bow mouth. The Spaniard was only interested in her blue ensign—when he saw it, he struck his colors, and the battle was over.

The treacherous frigate was, of course, no longer Spanish. They'd captured her in the dark the night before, and her hold was full of surly Spaniards. Lieutenant Groves waved from the deck as the *Dauntless* sailed past to come to her moorings.

Now began the tedious process of manning and jury-rigging the prizes. As Gillette and his lieutenants worked, James paced the quarterdeck and watched the *Prince Frederick* approach, his heart swelling. Shortly, she saluted, and twenty minutes later, she was hove to and her captain's barge was pulling toward them.

James was already smiling when Captain Lord Aubrey Beauclerk sprang over the rail. "A tidy piece of work, Norry!" he cried, pulling James into his arms.

"Aubrey, my God." James held him by the shoulders, grinning. "What are you doing out here? You can't have just stumbled on us."

"Ogle landed at Basse-Terre three days ago. He's on his way to Port Royal now, but I was detached to chase a few Frenchmen. I lost them, but I found you, didn't I? Yet you hardly needed me."

"I could use some of your crew," James said. "Come, let's go below. My God, how are you?"

Once Beauclerk had sent his orders back to his lieutenants, James poured the brandy. "So Ogle and Cathcart have come to rescue us at last," he said, handing his friend a glass.

"Yes and no." Beauclerk winced. "The good news is that Ogle has brought twenty-five line-of-battle ships and eight thousand troops. The bad news is that Lord Cathcart died last Thursday."

"Oh, my." James blinked. "Who has assumed his command?"

"A fellow named Wentworth. He's not a bad sort, but Ogle walks all over him without even trying. He has no confidence, no experience, no vigor."

James sighed. "Vernon will eat him alive."

"How about you?" smiled Beauclerk. "Holding your own against Old Grog?"

James rolled his eyes. "If he had his way, I'd demolish forts all day long. You were present for my first good sea fight in months."

"And what a fight it was. That prize will set you up for life, old man. Speaking of which—" He grinned. "Any change in the, er, marital state of affairs?"

James's smile faded. "Nothing you haven't already heard."

"I was sorry to hear about it," said Beauclerk. "A very bad business."

"Yes, well—" James got up and refilled his glass. "What's done is done. There are no other sails on the horizon."

"Oh, no." Beauclerk gazed at him. "You're still in love with her. After all that?"

"Of course not." James gave a weak shrug. "Love doesn't work that way, does it? Once you've accepted that it will never be returned—and I'd have to be deeply out of touch with reality not to have accepted that by now—then it just sort of goes away. Like a dammed creek soaking into the ground."

"If you say so." Beauclerk chewed his lip, then flung his arms over the back of his chair. "You know what your problem is, Norry? You bottle it up. Try getting angry for a change. You'll feel better immediately."

"Angry!" James laughed. "I've no shortage of anger, believe me. It brings me no solace."

"That's because you feel guilty about it. Take something you want for once. Don't tell yourself a story about how it's all for King and country. Have you thought about what you'll do with this prize-money? I thought not. Or have an affair, for Christ's sake. Port Royal has widows, doesn't it?"

"Port Royal has barely any women, period. The ones whose husbands die take the opportunity to get out."

"Well, one way or the other, you need companionship. Tell me you're not depriving yourself."

"I've been a bit busy for that sort of thing."

"Oh, please. How much time does it take? Don't answer that. You need a woman, James, and I won't hear any more excuses..."

Beauclerk was of a rare, irritating species: he and his wife were in glorious carnal and congenial

love, and he didn't understand why everybody else wasn't.

At the turn of the first dog watch, they made their way back up to the quarterdeck, passing seamen and officers who stopped to salute. The *Dauntless* was a crack, cheerful ship, and James felt approval radiating from his friend.

"I'll help you man your prizes," said Beauclerk, swinging over the side, "and I expect you at eight bells, so that I may show you *my* pride and joy."

James smiled as he watched Beauclerk's barge row away. It was only when he noticed Gillette staring at him that he realized he hadn't smiled that particular smile in years.

The *Prince Frederick* was ablaze with lanterns and awash with the music of a fife and a flat-tuned fiddle as James climbed over the side. The music paused for the boatswain and his mates to pipe James aboard, and the red-faced men on deck sprang to attention, stifling smiles as James somberly returned their salutes. Stifling his own smile, James ducked below as the music started up again.

Beauclerk's face made him forget everything else.

"It's damn good to see you, James," he said, passing him a glass of port. "Perhaps I didn't make that clear."

"I've been secretly hoping for years that they'd order you out here." James grimaced. "Not that I'd wish the West Indies on anybody."

"But the West Indies have been very good to you! Out here with nobody interfering, you've had a chance to shine, and they've trusted you with the place! They think very highly of you in London."

"They've a funny way of showing it." James took a long drink. "I'm just so weary of this place. I want to return to England—or the Mediterranean, or the East Indies for all I care. I've spent nine years baking on this purgatorial sandbar—surely London could take some pity on me."

"Haven't you written anybody?"

"Yes—well, not yet."

"No wonder you're still here!"

"I—it's embarrassing. I had a few loose ends to tie up."

"Ah. Sparrow."

James stared. "It horrifies me how quickly you said that." He dropped into his chair. "Do they all talk about me? Am I a laughingstock, Aubrey?"

"You're attaching far too much importance to yourself. The business with Sparrow comes up every now and then as an amusing accident vaguely associated with you, but nobody cares enough to go further than that."

"Thank God." James shut his eyes. "I genuinely feared for my career over that fiasco."

"It all seems to have been papered over now. Lovely what a bit of war can do."

"Hear, hear." James raised his glass weakly.

"Besides, she was only a gun-brig."

"What? Oh, the *Interceptor*. I'd been thinking more of the botched execution as the damning exhibit."

"No one cares about one little pirate. In the old days, there was always a handful of them from each batch who never made it to the scaffold. Just ask Ogle."

"It was his recriminations I feared most."

"Ogle thinks you're a bright, promising lad. He'd be happy to compare pirate-hunting notes with you, I'm sure."

"Thanks, but I'll pass." He blinked, put on a smile. "I trust your family is well? And Catherine?"

"Catherine is marvelous. Mother is as well as can be expected at her age, and still the terror of St. James's. Brother Charles is busy being a duke. Brother Vere is finding the Board of Admiralty a chilly place—he never was much good at politics, for all the help he had. If Wager goes, I'll doubt he'll stay. My other brothers continue on with their venal little lives. All is cracking well, I'd say..."

James nodded, soothed. No one could interrogate him about his family, as he had none living. Lord Vere Beauclerk had been the first captain he'd served under, and was behind most of his success in the service. The Beauclerks, sons of the first Duke of St. Albans, lived in the strange world of court intrigue and the moral freedom of the nobility. James had no desire to be a part of it, but it was fascinating, like a play. Beauclerk himself was both at home in it and apart from it, moving easily between worlds, liked by everyone he met. If James envied anything, it was that.

Once the jolly tales of the English peerage were over, the conversation steered back to James and his unmarried condition, something Beauclerk seemed determined to fix.

"Now that I think about it, you always were single-minded about these things," said Beauclerk. "Every now and then, you'd fix your sights on one girl and think of none other."

James shook his head. "Those were just infatuations."

"So this Elizabeth Swann, she was different?"

"Do you know," said James, gazing at his lap, "when you're boarding a ship, how there's always a moment once you've cleared a deck when you fear you've missed a man, one who's right behind you about to blow your head off—do you know that feeling? Like an itch on the back of your skull?" James drained his glass. "That's what it was like."

"Like you missed something?"

James gazed at his friend. "I've spent my life pursuing one thing, and suddenly there was something else—and the moment I realized it, I lost it."

Beauclerk smiled. "Trust me, James, as someone with slightly more experience in love, that there will be others. The first one always feels like the only one, but it'll pass."

James nodded. "I'm sure you're right."

In the morning, Gillette stood with James on the forecandle, overlooking the pathetic listing form of the grounded Spanish ship. "We can't heave her off," said Gillette, shielding his eyes with his hand.

"We've tried everything short of tearing her apart."

James nodded. "Very well. Take off her cargo in the boats and scuttle her. We'll add her timbers to the shoal, where other travelers may beware of her."

She was a fat prize, stuffed with tobacco and wool, and an ungentle tour through the great cabin turned up a chest of silver. The hot work stretched into the afternoon, with all the ships in their little fleet lending their boats. At about half past one, when nearly everything had been taken out of her, the chest was lowered from a boom. As the men eased the line through the block, there was a groan and then a crack, and the chest plunged. The men in the boat below pushed off from the ship's side just in time and the chest struck the water, barely making a splash as the sea sucked it down.

"If we wait for low tide, we might be able to salvage it," Gillette offered. "There won't be more than two fathoms of water over it then."

"Leave it," said James. "We've no time for this. Signal the fleet; we'll weigh as soon as we've scuttled the ship. Hurry, now."

As the *Dauntless* turned into the southwest, James stood at the taffrail and watched the wrecked merchantman settling slowly onto the shoal, joining the chest that lay on the rocky bottom. Sparrow would have to work for it, but he ought to count himself well paid. All told, they'd both profited handsomely, as had England. Maybe there was some hope for this misbegotten partnership after all.

Jack wove his way down the wharf choked with stinking human and animal forms, negotiating bales and hogsheads destined for the holds of outbound ships, breathing in the sweet scent of Tortuga mud and unwashed pirates. Past the banks of tobacco smoke, the hordes of men and the livestock wandering to and fro, he spotted a two-masted Jamaica sloop moored to bollards head and stern, her gangplank down in a clear invitation.

"The devil take that poxy blackguard!" bellowed a familiar voice from the deck. "He's bilked us out of half our cordage, blast his top-lights!" The hollering boatswain paused with a foot on the gangplank and looked down at the quay. "Jack!" he cried, turning white and crossing himself, then turning pink again and thundering down the plank to seize Jack by the hand. "We thought you were dead!" His eyes widened. "You're not, are you? Sorry, gotta ask."

"The blood my black heart pumps is as warm and red as ever, I promise," said Jack, jostling Gibbs's meaty arm. "Come along with me—I'm parched."

Gibbs fell into step beside Jack as they headed toward the row of taverns at the center of town. "But how? We all saw the *Pearl* taken. What sort of mad trick did you pull this time?"

"An easy one," said Jack. "Not even one for the top ten. I have acquired meself a pet Navy man."

"Nnn—" Try as he might, Gibbs could not force the name out of his mouth, so instead he whispered, "The *Commodore*?"

"Who else?" Jack grinned. "He is putty in my hands. My ship's in Havana—I've seen her—an' my new friend is arranging as we speak for his comrades to invade that fair city so that I might carry her off in the commotion."

Gibbs looked uneasy. "Everyone else has signed onto other ships, you know—you were dead, what were they supposed to do? Marty and Cotton have joined up with Booth, and Anamaria's got her

own boat now. As for me—we don't do much more'n snap up local traders, but it's a living, an' you can't blame us for wantin' to live—"

"Enough." Jack waved an ornamented hand. "I begrudge you nothing. You are absolved, all of you. I never expected anyone to wait for me or do aught but look after themselves. However"—his eyes brightened—"when it comes time to take back the *Pearl*, I hoped I might count on a few of you."

"That's just the problem," sighed Gibbs. "We've signed the articles. None of us can jump ship. Especially if there's a chance we'll land in the Commodore's lap."

"Don't worry about him." Jack winked. "He's a tame Commodore now. Wanna see the evidence?" He took a tattered letter from his coat and unfolded it, cloth-soft, on Gibbs's palm.

Gibbs's lips moved as he scanned the letter. "This is gibberish, Jack."

"It's a cipher." Jack snatched it back. "It says there's a chest of Spanish silver with our name on it sittin' two fathoms down on a shoal off the Punta de San Francisco."

"But—" Gibbs wrinkled his brow. "I give up. Why's the Commodore givin' you Spanish silver, now?"

"Because," said Jack, "I am his newest and most valuable information-monger." He flinched from Gibbs's sudden suspicious look. "Not *that* kind. It's spyin', not snitchin'."

Gibbs was still wary. "He never asked you to give up any of your old mates?"

"Norrington's got bigger problems than pirates these days," Jack replied. "I tell him where to find Spaniards, an' he promises to help me get back my ship."

Gibbs crossed himself again. "You've made a deal with the devil, Jack."

Jack laughed. "You're the one who said he's 'not so bad.' No, Norrington's no devil—he's not nearly clever enough, for one thing. I've got him danglin' on the line, an' I've only to reel him in."

They had reached the fragrant alley behind the Faithful Bride, which was paved with sleeping drunks. Gibbs stepped over a snoring body and paused, looking back over his shoulder. "I dunno, Jack—I expect all manner of crackbrained schemes from you, but never a thing like this."

"Gibbs." Jack blinked. "It's Captain Jack Sparrow, remember? I have the situation entirely in hand. He's wrapped around my little finger, I promise. What do you think—that I've turned Navy? That I give a damn whether the English win or lose? The Commodore is my my instrument, my trump card, my puppet on a string—"

"All right, all right." Gibbs sighed. "I'm sure you know what yer doin'. But, er"—he looked embarrassed—"you're not doin' this 'cause you want to..." he made a twirling motion with his hand, "...with the Commodore, are you?" He shrugged, reddening. "I know you've lost your head over a pretty face before."

Jack laughed out loud. "My dear Gibbs, if I wanted to..." he twirled his hand, "...with the Commodore, I'd have done it already, many times over." He narrowed his eyes. "Why? Is there somethin' I should know?"

"Not as such..." Gibbs looked as though he regretted ever bringing the subject up. "I just don't think you're his type, is all."

"Nonsense," Jack sniffed. "If I wanted to, I could—which isn't to say I—oh, never mind. It's a business arrangement, nothing more."

Gibbs shook his head, gazing at Jack with profound dubiousness. "I really hope you know what yer about."

"I have never been more certain," said Jack. "Trust me—things are goin' exactly according to plan."

In which James makes merry, against his will

The master-attendant radiated impatience as he piloted the *Dauntless* to her mooring. He'd seen the little fleet of prizes *Dauntless* and *Prince Frederick* had trailed into the harbor, and he had to find space for them somewhere amid the transports, frigates, tenders, bomb-ketches, hospital-ships, fire-ships, and ships of the line jostling yardarms in the anchorage. From the forecastle, James counted one hundred twenty-four sail. He shuddered to think what the barracks, taverns, boarding houses and brothels looked like, stacked to the rafters with infantry, Marines, grenadiers, engineers, militiamen, seamen, and workmen. The price of lodging was up to prohibitive heights by now, and forget about a decent bite to eat. Only liquor would be freely available, which combined with the shortage of bed space meant it would be impossible to walk anywhere without tripping over an insensate body. Wars were always such cheerful things at the outset. Luckily, it wasn't a kind of cheer James was susceptible to.

He searched the anchorage for Ogle's flag and found it aboard the *Russell*. *Dauntless* and *Prince Frederick* saluted the Admirals, and an hour later, Vernon's new flag, the *Princess Caroline*, signaled for James to come aboard.

"There you are." Vernon sat in his stateroom with Commodore Lestock and Rear-Admiral Ogle, both of whom James had served under before. They nodded to him, Ogle with some warmth and Lestock with naked malice. "So that was what you had to sneak off for." Vernon pushed out a chair with his foot. "Of course, that's the last time I let you use private intelligence like that. It's disloyal, frankly."

James stiffened and sat. "With respect, sir, you gave me your approval."

"And I'm telling you I won't do it again. By the way, prepare yourself for another disappointment: I'm taking away your flag."

James nodded. He'd been expecting this.

"Sorry to do it, but Commodore Lestock here is a good deal senior to you."

James glanced at Lestock, who wore a look of thin triumph. He was the oldest of them, a seedy, nervous man. "Whatever you think best, sir."

"You can keep the *Dauntless*. I'm giving Gillette the *Shoreham*. It's only a frigate, but I'm sure he'll be happy enough not to have you breathing down his neck."

"Er, thank you, sir."

"Any preferences for first lieutenants? Gillette wanted to take Groves with him, but I said it was up to you."

So Gillette had known that James had lost his broad pendant before he did. "Gillette may take him. I'll have Arthur Forrest out of the *Shoreham*, then."

"He's all yours. Good officer, Forrest. I've half a mind to steal him for myself, but I leave the staffing up to Watson. Well, now—" Vernon smiled patronizingly. "Won't it be nice to worry about nothing but stores and muster-books again?"

James glanced back at the two other men, who were watching him closely. "I wish to serve in whatever capacity best suits His Majesty," he said frostily.

"Of course you do." Vernon smirked. "Don't pretend you're not ambitious, Norrington. Let a bit of your baser nature out from time to time, eh? Otherwise, men might think your blood's thin. Or governors' daughters, more to the point." All three of them laughed.

Looking back, James was sure this was the moment he really began to hate the man.

Ogle was a fighting admiral, and James had always been happy to take orders from him, but not eager to get near him. His stout figure strained his buttons and exuded power; it was mass one didn't want to get in the way of. Bartholomew Roberts had got in the way of it and entered history. Political enemies had fared no better. James spent all night avoiding his eyes; he couldn't shake the feeling that Ogle could sense James's treachery with Sparrow, could see the pirate-sympathy lurking in his breast.

The seating at dinner alternated blue and red uniforms between the ladies. James and Miss Claringbold sat halfway down the table between Elizabeth and the nobodies at the center, where Gillette chatted merrily with a major's wife. James's life had been a painstaking march up the table order from that dreary center—but Gillette didn't seem to mind where he was, and if Elizabeth hadn't been the hostess, she'd have been there too, thanks to her low marriage. A seat was no index to happiness. Turner wasn't at the table, perhaps by mutual agreement, which made James vaguely sad. No matter how much he disliked Turner, James felt more kinship with Elizabeth than he did with these Army gentlemen. They were the men who'd been happy to credit his father with the victory at Gibraltar, but would never have invited the old man to dinner.

"To His Majesty, King George of England!" bellowed Vernon in a voice that seemed to come up from the earth.

"To the King!" Fifty glasses lifted to fifty pairs of lips.

Miss Claringbold winced when her glass clattered against her plate. James smiled. She really was quite sweet. He wished he could think of a damn thing to say to her. The woman to his right was Captain Newton's wife, who he was certain actively disliked him. That Miss Claringbold was glancing toward Gillette between bites just depressed him, not because he wanted her for himself, but because any rejection of his company stung. He wracked his brain for things a lady might be interested in. "Did you know," he found himself saying, "that many captains in the Navy bring their wives aboard their ships?"

This interested her more than he'd anticipated. "How marvelous!" she said, then giggled behind her hand and added, "I mean, how beastly. What if there were a battle?"

"I do not countenance it myself," he said, turning back to his food, "for that very reason."

"Oh." She drooped, then rallied. "Perhaps if you marry, you'll change your mind." It would have sounded flirtatious if she hadn't aimed another look at Gillette right then.

"Perhaps," he said weakly, and the conversation died again.

Vernon, who was seated to the right of a morose-looking Elizabeth, stood again and raised his glass. "To our good friends in the Army," he brayed, "who have come at such a prime moment, and to the dear memory of Lord Cathcart, may he find his rest."

"To the Army and Lord Cathcart!" The level of wine dropped another half-inch in fifty glasses.

To everyone's regret, Vernon did not sit. "And to my most worthy colleague General Wentworth, may the burden of command not lie too heavily upon his shoulders."

"To General Wentworth!"

As Vernon sat, Wentworth went up, like a stop on an organ. He was a round-faced man with a thin mouth that twitched at the corners. "I in turn would like to toast my esteemed colleague Admiral Vernon, who has been so gracious to me in the first days of my command..."

A man's hatred for another was never more apparent than when he was complimenting him. James looked away from the gruesome spectacle of disingenuous flattery and passed Miss Claringbold the gravy. Soon Brigadier Guise was on his feet, toasting Governor Swann and Elizabeth. Miss Claringbold looked drowsy and flushed, and James wondered how he might limit her drink without insulting her. If the toasts went on much longer, she'd be face down in her meat.

Finally the plum tarts appeared, and as soon as she could, Elizabeth signaled the ladies to withdraw. James bid his two seating companions goodbye, receiving a sweet smile from Miss Claringbold and a sniff from Mrs. Newton, and once they were gone, he poured himself a generous glass of port. Normally he despised men who drank too much, but he needed some kind of defense against the bluster and back-slapping that was about to take place.

Snuff boxes came out and the room filled with the sounds of vigorous snorting. Vernon made several more toasts to each of the principle Army officers, who in turn toasted Vernon, Ogle, Lestock, and the handful of captains they'd slapped on the back since arriving in port. Then the conversation shifted abruptly to business.

"As you know," said Vernon, "the Marquis d'Antin is somewhere out there to windward with nineteen ships, joined perhaps by Roche-Allard with his twelve and Roquefeuil with four. So as much as we may want to strike a blow against the Dons, we must protect Jamaica first..."

James was growing drowsy. His eyes wandered away from Vernon and toward the Army officers. Their faces varied from flushed to blank, none of them quite knowing what to make of Vernon. Wentworth was hunched, as though dreading the blow of another compliment. Only Guise was also looking around the room, and for an uncomfortable moment, their eyes met. Then Guise looked away with a wrinkle of his pointed nose. There was no sense forgetting that if it hadn't been for his commission, James wouldn't be allowed in the same room with most of these men. As far as many of them were concerned, the Navy was just short of republicanism. James stifled a yawn and tried to focus on the strategizing going on at the head of the table.

"Snuff, old man?" Beauclerk held out an enamel-painted snuff box toward James. He took some, sneezed, and a restorative wave of nausea brought him further awake. Then he got a look at the snuff box. It was painted with nymphs and satyrs, who were—

Beauclerk grinned. "Catherine gave it to me. See?"

James squinted at the inscription, which read, *To keep you company, darling Beauclerk, when I cannot be there to do the job.*

James rolled his eyes and handed the box back.

Jack crouched under the window sill, munching on a stuffed date. Norrington's snowy head was not ten feet away, and the part of Jack that was still eight years old had to resist the urge to bounce the uneaten half of the date off Norrington's temple. That would, however, cut off the stream of intelligence—and the word had to be used loosely—flowing from Vernon's lips.

"We cannot even think of the riches of Havana or Cartagena until we've rid the Caribbean of the

French fleet," the man was saying. The other Navy gents were nodding while the Army looked blank. From what Jack had gathered round the taverns, they'd lost their General recently and didn't have much faith in the new one.

"Our priority must be to protect Jamaica from invasion," a ruddy little man was saying now—the new General, he had to be. "Thus, as the Admiral advises, we must proceed to Port Louis before anything else can be done, where our latest intelligence places d'Antin..."

Jack sat under the window and drew his knees to his chest. There was no telling how long he'd have to wait if the English went off to chase Frenchmen. He saw his ship disappearing as surely as though Barbossa were at the wheel. He had seen d'Antin's squadron with his own eyes, starved and diseased, dejectedly filling their water casks for the trip back to France, but—he heard Norrington's voice clearly in his head—he had no proof. He had no way to turn his worthless testimony into something a pack of admirals and generals would believe. No material evidence, nothing he could hold in his hand—

His fingers curled round a bag on his belt, which clinked. He yanked it free and poured its contents into his palm. Three knuckle bones, a Vodou fetish, and two signet rings—one of which he'd stolen from the hand of Don Francisco Martinez de Retez. God knew where Portobello's erstwhile governor was now, but whatever his present status, his remarks about the French fleet would have more weight than Jack's.

Creeping below the level of the windows, Jack went off to find a supply of foolscap and sealing wax.

Ten minutes into Wentworth's opinions on the fighting spirit of the Spanish regulars, a footman bent down next to James with a salver, which bore a note. James gave him a questioning look. "From your ship, sir," replied the servant.

James unfolded the note, folded it back up, and excused himself. He needed to have a word with his new first lieutenant about the liberal use of the word "emergency." As he stepped from the drive onto the road, the bushes rustled and said, "Psst! Gov'nor!"

He groaned. "I should have known," he said, and hurried into the cover of the bushes. "Sparrow, do you realize how incredibly dangerous—"

"Yes, I do, which is why we'll make this quick." Sparrow rummaged in his coat. "I've got a letter for you that Admiral Vernon'll be pleased to see."

James took the sealed letter. "You've read it?"

"It's no great trick—all you do is heat a knife. But no time for trade secrets. Long story short: the French are history. D'Antin's ships are barely sailable for all the disease amongst his men, and Port Louis doesn't have enough provisions for them. They'll leave for Brest in a week or two."

James turned the letter over greedily in his hands. "It's all here? Ample proof?"

"That's the seal of the old governor of Portobello," Sparrow said proudly. "If the Admiral won't believe him, there's not much more I can do."

"Excellent." James tucked the letter into his coat. "Well done, Sparrow. Now get out of here before you're noticed by one of the hundreds of military personnel stacked on top of each other in this town."

Instead of returning to the party, James walked around for a while longer in the mild Caribbean evening, clearing his head. Sometime since last November, he and Sparrow had come to trust each other, and he felt a kind of pleasure at it, though he wasn't sure why. Their partnership—friendship?—was pure in an upside-down way. Sparrow was in irredeemable reprobate; ergo, James could say anything to him. For once, he didn't scoff at the freedom criminals possessed.

When he returned, the mansion was overflowing with guests for the after-dinner ball, and the way into the house was through a wall of laughter, talk, perfume and sweat. Distracted, he handed over his card at the door, then jumped when the servant brayed, "Captain James Norrington!" into the throng. Dozens of eyes fell on him for a moment, indifferent and bovine, before turning away. Sliding his hand over his coat until he heard the crinkle of paper, he strolled inside, safe in his obscurity, and followed the music.

Inside the dim, humid ballroom, the minuet had just begun, and the floor had cleared for two dancers. His breath caught at the sight of Elizabeth, flushed and glowing in yellow silk damask, her smile plastered on as she opened the ball with Admiral Vernon. She danced well because she did everything well, but James was certain she'd rather have been caulking seams at the wharf. To think their marriage might have been like this—*demi-coupé, pas de bourree, pas grave*, repeat. Sullen and precise.

On the edge of the floor, James spotted Ogle, who was watching Elizabeth and Vernon with profound confusion. James stepped quickly over to him. "Sir, excuse me, but—"

"Is that Elizabeth *Swann*?" Ogle scowled.

"She was," said James with a sigh.

"Ah, yes. Now I recall." Ogle turned a look of blatant pity on him. "Very bad business."

"Yes, well, the Turners are happy." James cleared his throat. "Sir, my intelligence agent has intercepted a letter you and Admiral Vernon ought to see immediately."

Ogle took the letter. "Interesting. It's about the French?" James nodded. "Good; well done. Now run along, Norrington—go find that pretty girl you were seated with at dinner."

The minuet was nearing its end. James scanned the crowd for Miss Claringbold's green taffeta and spotted her near the door, wringing her hands. She looked up with wide eyes as he approached.

"Would you do me the honor of the next dance?" he asked with a bow, suddenly nervous.

"Er—" She glanced around. "I—"

Anxious to deflect the approaching rejection, James said, "If you have committed yourself already, it's quite all—"

"No." She smiled bravely. "I would be delighted to dance with you, Captain Norrington."

Once their dance had ended, James saw Gillette cross the room toward her, and puzzled at his stab of jealousy. He didn't even care for the girl. He barely knew her. Then again, neither did Gillette, but love was prescient like that, striking before one had a chance to find out *who* one loved.

As he was leaving the dance floor, Elizabeth appeared out of the crowd—another woman who was happy to entertain him as long as he wasn't a romantic threat.

"I have been listening," she said, taking his arm and walking with him. "I've been your spy, you

might say."

"Oh?" His hand drifted to his now-empty breast pocket. "A dishonest profession, spying, even when good comes of it."

"Nevertheless, I've kept my ears open for any mention of you."

He crooked a brow. "Do you have some reason to fear for my safety?"

"No, I just don't like Admiral Vernon."

"Elizabeth, lower your voice." James stepped into her. "I appreciate your concern, but frankness is not always—"

"Relax, nobody can hear a thing. Father presented Will and me to the Admirals before dinner, and Admiral Ogle looked right through me. He didn't recognize me at all!"

"That is because he failed to connect the poised and beautiful young woman with the little girl who used to climb to the parapet walk and throw pebbles at the Marines."

"Oh, stop. I am not *poised*. James—" She pulled away, and her eyes were suddenly full of mischief. "I have something to show you, if you promise not to be angry."

"Oh, dear." He stared at her outstretched hand. "Will I regret this?"

She smiled. "You must promise not to give me a lecture. Promise?"

He took her fingers carefully in his big hand. "Very well."

They pushed through the crowd to the end of the hall, past the chattering spillover from the ballroom and down a side passage where the servants came and went. Elizabeth put her finger to her lips and crept over to a door, dragging him along. Inside was a small library, where James recalled waiting once or twice when he'd been her suitor, sitting stiffly and rubbing at the scuffs on his shoes while she girded her loins for their long, silent walks. No such memories seemed to encumber her as she tiptoed to a bookcase and shifted aside a dusty set of William Fulbecke's legal treatises to admit the sound of voices through a hole in the panel.

First Vernon's voice, then Ogle's drifted into the room. "*Elizabeth!*" James mouthed furiously, and darted forward to move Mr. Fulbecke back into place, but Elizabeth stopped him, setting her mouth with little-girl stubbornness. Now he was trapped; he couldn't argue with her as long as the Admirals were a few feet away.

In such a state of surrender, the only thing he could do was listen. They bent their heads toward the hole.

"...can do nothing, as long as the French..." Vernon spoke quickly, tensely.

"...but with Torres gone to Havana, now would be the time to act—"

"—if we knew for sure the French would not come to his rescue..."

He glanced at Elizabeth's puzzled face, then made his move, dragging her from the room by her wrist before she could protest. He hated using his strength against a woman, but Elizabeth was a special case.

Out in the passage, she pulled out of his grasp. "I'd hoped they'd be talking about something less

dull," she said crossly. "You, for instance."

He hurried her back toward the hall. "Those were state secrets, Elizabeth!"

"Since when does two old men gossiping constitute a state secret?"

"Promise me you won't do that again."

She thrust out her chin coolly. "I shall promise nothing of the sort." She folded her arms. "I was hoping to hear them praise you. They were doing it earlier."

They'd merged back into the crowd. "It's more likely that they'd discuss how I let a pirate escape."

"James, can I tell you something you're not going to want to hear?" She gazed at him intently. "Nobody cares that Jack escaped except you."

For the second time, he considered telling her. Turner benefited from Sparrow's reflected glow; why not him?

No. He recovered and said, "Why do I have the suspicion that you are sneaking around bookcases because you're avoiding your guests?"

"Perhaps because you know me."

"Your father will be missing you."

"Last I saw him, he was dancing with Mrs. Daintree and was oblivious to anything else."

"Which reminds me, where is your own husband?"

"Here." Will Turner's bright, unwelcome face appeared through the crowd. "Elizabeth, I listened to General Wentworth and Brigadier Guise for twenty minutes and they didn't say anything remotely interesting."

James put his head in his hand. Evidently no one at this party was there to enjoy themselves; the Army and Navy were plotting, the hosts were spying and scheming, and James was wishing he were elsewhere. "Excuse me," he said, "but I believe I need some air." The Turners let him go.

The Jamaican oak side cabinet was exactly the height and depth of Jack's crouching body. The Governor probably hadn't meant to furnish his house to ease the way for pirate invasion, but all the niches, French doors, closets, balconies and leafy plants littering the place made it too easy. He watched Norrington march Elizabeth out of the room next to the parlor Vernon and Ogle had retired to; it wasn't hard to guess what that was all about. When the coast was clear, he darted into the library and over to the wall it shared with the parlor. Rectangles in the disturbed dust showed him where to go, and shortly he had his ear to the hole in the wall.

"...Lezo couldn't stand a moment against us at Cartagena..."

"...makes just as much sense to attack Torres at Havana..."

"But the French, still can't be sure the French are too weak to fight..."

"...must move as soon as possible...d'Antin is still out there..."

Jack squeezed his fists in frustration. He had done all he could to convince them the French were

gone short of producing the Marquis d'Antin himself. For the first time, he felt helpless. Norrington couldn't do anything. Jack needed a better ally in the Royal Navy. This one they called Lord Aubrey Beauclerk—now *he* would have been a good ally. Jack had been listening to conversations all night, and the admirals and generals had kissed this Beauclerk fellow's arse several times already. It was funny how the quality of information changed depending on who it came from. If Jack could get that chap clamoring for an attack on Havana, he might be somewhere.

He crept out into the passage and along the servants' hallway until he was nearly back in the big reception hall. Leaning against a pillar, he said in a voice pitched deep: "I hear the French have sailed for France with their tails between their legs."

The conversation nearby paused. Jack shrank into his column, staying out of sight. "And Havana's ripe for it!" he added in a higher voice.

After a moment, the nearby talk started up again. Jack slumped. It was no use; he was out of ideas.

A familiar face appeared in the crowd. It was barely there before disappearing again; as usual, the Commodore was in a hurry. Jack watched his back recede in the direction of the garden, and for a moment, he forgot his ship as he contemplated the spectacle of the Commodore in his natural habitat. Darting toward the servants' hallway, he followed.

The night had cooled, and the dew settling on the bushes brought a suggestion of the Januaries James was more familiar with. He tugged his cravat and breathed the humid chill with relief.

Not far off, a group of young men were drinking and singing, interrupting each verse with guffaws and cheers. James watched them with vague amusement until he heard his name. Instantly his ears sharpened. It was a bawdy verse, full of innuendo he couldn't quite make out through the drink and the distance, but he could tell his co-star was a girl of indeterminate identity. Half out of anger and half out of curiosity, he wandered over toward the young men, slowly, to see at what point they'd notice him.

The first one to turn and see him was Mr. Claringbold. James saw the moment the greatness of his blunder dawned on him; his clay-red flush drained away and his mouth fell open. "Captain Norrington," he blurted, to alert his friends who hadn't recognized James. "Care to—join us in a drink?"

The other men knew exactly who James was, because poor Mr. Claringbold was suddenly alone. James smiled, molars grinding. "That song you were singing," he said. "Sing it for me again, would you?"

"I know what you're thinking," said Claringbold in a rush, "and it's not about you, I swear—it's just about any man who—all right, it's about *a* man who—"

"Then there's no reason not to sing it for me, is there?" James clasped his hands behind his back and bared his teeth in another lupine smile.

The boy nodded and wiped his sweating forehead, then began in a shrill wheeze: "*He's rich and he's handsome as he can be, but the lass must know something we can't see, with a hey nonny, hey nonny—*"

"Skip that."

"Right." Another cough and a cleared throat. "*He's six feet tall and he's two feet wide, but he's still*

too short for his would-be bride..." Another round of hey nonnies came and went, and James wondered what he had done to deserve this. The boy had hit his stride was now belting out, "*The world makes way for power and money, but neither mean much to a lusty maid's—*"

"Enough!" Personal pride be damned, those was Elizabeth's—particulars—they were talking about. "Mr. Claringbold," said James, "can I ask you something?" The boy nodded, swallowing. "Which son are you? Third? Fourth?"

"Third, sir."

James narrowed his eyes. "And your sister—she's the last unmarried one, isn't she?"

"Well, I—I'm not sure how that's any of your—"

"Let me give you a word of advice, Mr. Claringbold." James drew very close. "If you consider a man to be your meal ticket, singing insulting songs about him within his earshot is not the most intelligent way to proceed." The boy nodded again, his blood-shot eyes nearly spilling over. "And by the way, if it's money you want, you'd best stop sniffing around Gillette—his post date's fresh and he won't be an admiral for a good long while. Now go dunk your head and sober up before you do yourself serious harm."

James watched the young man hurry inside, head down, barely noticing as he pushed past Gillette. "Everything all right, sir?" asked Gillette.

"I believe I'm a laughingstock," said James, with wonder.

"Nonsense." Gillette chuckled. "This town worships you."

"That's laying it on a bit thick." James smiled nevertheless.

"Sir—" Gillette looked at his shoes, "—I was meaning to ask you—that is—"

"You were wondering whether I'd mind if you called on Miss Claringbold," James supplied.

"Well—yes. Oh dear, it's not that obvious, is it?"

"You're welcome to pay her as much attention as you like," said James. "As long as you don't make up any songs about it."

"Beg your pardon, sir?"

"Never mind." James sighed. "Go dance with her."

Gillette grinned. "We've already danced together twice. Any more and people will talk."

"At least they won't sing," James muttered.

"Sir—" Gillette leaned forward, "—are you sure everything's all right?"

James was about to reply when a hand clapped on Gillette's shoulder and then patted him vigorously. "Captain Gillette!" said Beauclerk. "Looking good, my dear fellow."

"Er—as are you, Lord Aubrey." Gillette accepted a handshake. Sensing a dismissal, he excused himself and dashed inside.

"You," smiled Beauclerk, "look like you could use a drink."

"Heavens, yes." James craned his neck. "Do you have one?"

"We'll have to go inside, I'm afraid." Beauclerk linked their arms. "How are you holding up?"

"Thank God there are so few women here," said James. "Otherwise I might have to ask one of them to dance."

"You love dancing!"

"I do?" James shrugged. "I suppose I once did."

"Norry, I can't believe this." Beauclerk stopped. "You're melancholy! Is one wayward woman all it takes to bring you this low?"

"I am not *melancholy*," James huffed.

"Come on, you've got to get back on the horse." They began walking again. "Lord knows I used to be cynical about marriage—just look at my family—but I've come to realize there's someone for everyone. Here, you remember old Fitzzy from the *Lyme*?"

"Fitzgerald?" James narrowed his eyes. "Whom I believe we used to call *Goat-Face* Fitzgerald?"

"That's the one! If he can find a wife, you certainly can. Just look at you! What woman wouldn't —"

"Enough." James held up a hand. "Love is a pleasant subject to those who are in it, but not as much for the rest of us."

"Sorry, old boy." Beauclerk drooped. "I just hate seeing you so down in the jib."

"Talking about it certainly won't help."

"But if we don't talk about that, we'll have to talk about the war, and then we'll be as dull as everyone else!"

James laughed. "Now that you mention it, war *is* even duller a subject than love, isn't it?"

"So what about this Miss Claringbold?" Beauclerk winked. "I didn't see her getting up and running from you."

"You must not have been looking too closely, then," James grumbled, "or you'd have seen she couldn't take her eyes off Gillette."

Beauclerk clucked his tongue. "It's difficult to find a wife in the tropics," he sighed. "Which is why you must come back to England with me. I have just the girl for you there—" He paused and stretched out his arms: "Lord Bexbury's daughter."

James scowled. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Why not?" Beauclerk linked their arms again. "Catherine and I saw her recently and she's beautiful. She's charming and gracious and she's got an old swashbuckling soul, which I know you like. Oh, and she's utterly tone-deaf—she can't tell a horn from a harpsichord. See? Perfect for you!"

James laughed. "Isn't my wife supposed to complement me? To excel where I am weak and vice versa?"

"I would have said so once," said Beauclerk, "but I tell you, there is nothing worse than being outdone by your wife. Better to hold all the cards and save yourself the humiliation."

"I wonder," said James, "if there is such a thing as real companionship."

"Of course! You know whatever I say about Catherine that we're inseparable. You deserve the same."

James smiled weakly. It was hard to explain without sounding maudlin that whenever he looked for companionship, he always found the spot occupied. Even Sparrow loved his ship too much to have time for anyone else.

"Norrington!"

Still wondering what "Sparrow" and "companionship" were doing in the same thought, James turned toward Vernon's voice. As usual, Ogle was with him. "Lord Aubrey, would you excuse us?" said Vernon, and Beauclerk saluted and drew away. "With us, Norrington." The Admiral jerked his head, and the three of them went back down the passage toward the parlor.

"You may as well be the first to know," Vernon said as soon as they'd shut the door. He poured three glasses of port from the decanter that had taken up residence since the parlor had become a staff room, and passed the glasses around. "The fleet sails as soon as we can take the stores and troops on board. I'd make you captain of the fleet, but I need you on the *Dauntless*, so as of now, you're my adjutant. Sir Chaloner and I will be busy with the damned Army, so it's up to you to get this squadron ready to sail in ten days."

"Our destination, sir?"

"We must first chase d'Antin away before we can do a thing. I'd rather keep this information close, but since you rarely speak to another living soul anyway, you might as well know: it's to be Cartagena."

There wasn't enough cover for Jack to follow Norrington outside, so for fifteen minutes, he crouched in a niche near the garden doors, behind a plinth holding a gaudy blue vase. When he heard Norrington's voice again, he peered out.

So that was Beauclerk. This was Jack's first good look at him, and while the Commodore was as gorgeous as a prize rooster on market day, Beauclerk was beautiful. He was slightly shorter, with eyes of a brilliant blue one didn't often see in nature, and a smile that waxed and waned but never died. What an odd companion for the gloomy Commodore. But Norrington was smiling, too—good God, he was *laughing*. That smile was heart-stopping when it wasn't fake. Jack watched, awed.

"...Don't be ridiculous."

"Why not? Catherine and I saw her recently and she's beautiful..."

Beauclerk must not have noticed the ardent focus on his friend's face, or he wouldn't have been talking about women. Or maybe he *had* noticed and that was the point. Either way, here was another comical installment in Norrington's farce of a love life. Heaven help the man or maid who drew the amorous longings of that impossible man. Of course, the less logical, more carnal part of Jack didn't care how impossible he was—and here was proof that he fancied his own sex.

Next to Beauclerk's beauty, all of Norrington's imperfections stood out—the weak chin, the

crooked tooth, the eyes too close together—and still Jack looked at him. There was something deeply silly about Norrington, but also something sweet. He was as vain as a fifty-shilling whore, yet utterly blind to his own value.

Vernon and Ogle appeared and dragged Norrington away. Radiant young Beauclerk faded back into the crowd and Jack didn't miss him; he had eyes only for Norrington. Sticking to the shadows, he ran after the Admirals, scurrying into the library and taking up his position at the bookcase.

As Vernon talked, James's eyes went to the wall. On this side, a bust of Cicero hid the hole from view. If that didn't beat all—dishonesty bracketed by law on one side and eloquence on the other. Then he froze. It wasn't a sound, precisely, but *something* made his hair stand on end, and he glanced toward the hidden hole again. Cicero gazed back with milky, undead eyes.

James swallowed. "Sir, if I might make a suggestion, the passage out there leads to the kitchen—" he pointed to the wall opposite Cicero, "—and the servants are occasionally impertinent."

"It's nearly time for supper anyway," said Vernon. "Come along, Sir Chaloner, let us mingle with the fine people of Port Royal. Norrington, find a girl to dance with—that's an order. And get rid of these—" He shoved two glasses of port into James's hands, and swept out the door.

James waited till the Admirals had disappeared down the corridor before darting into the library and shutting the door. "Elizabeth," he hissed, "did you not hear me say you could get into serious —"

Jack Sparrow spun around from where he'd had his ear to the wall. "Do something!" he cried.

James gaped. Recovering, he hissed, "You must get out of here this very instant! And what do you mean, 'do something'?"

"You were supposed to go to Havana, not Cartagena!"

"I can't make the Admiral's decisions for him! And did I mention you're endangering us both by being here right now?"

Sparrow indicated the three glasses in James's hands. "Rough night, eh?"

"It wasn't, until *you*—"

There was a knock at the door.

James aimed a kick at Sparrow's arse as the pirate dove into the kneehole of the heavy oak desk. He pulled himself together and took a deep breath. "Enter," he said, somewhat too high.

The door creaked open and Elizabeth slipped inside. "And you gave *me* a hard time for it," she scolded.

"I was not—I mean, I am not here because—" James sighed. "Is supper served?"

"It is. But I shan't let you out of here unless you tell me what you were doing."

"Elizabeth, I'm really not in the mood—"

"And what on Earth are you doing with all that port?"

"I was just about to—"

There was a cough.

Her eyes went to the wall, and James breathed out. She thought the sound had been in the other room. He tried not to look at the desk.

"There's no shame in a bit of adventure, you know," she said, coming closer. "Every now and then, you should take a page from the book of—"

"If you say 'Jack Sparrow'," James snarled, "so help me God—"

"Captain!" came a muffled cry, followed by a thud and a curse. Elizabeth's eyes grew round as Sparrow crawled out from under the desk, rubbing his head. "*Captain* Jack Sparrow."

"Jack!" she cried with delight. Then she put her hand to her mouth in horror. "James—" she looked to him frantically, "—oh, please don't—"

Helpless, James let his face speak for him.

It still took Elizabeth a few moments to figure it out. Several things passed over her face, too quick to identify. Finally she smirked. "James Norrington, I'm surprised at you." She turned to Jack. "I thought you turned down that letter!"

"I did," said Sparrow, ignoring James's shaking head, "but then the Commodore did me a good turn. Funny how things work out."

"This is—" She pressed her temple. "This is beyond bizarre. I don't know whether to laugh or cry."

"You could forget," said James. "Or first, you could help me get Sparrow out of here, and *then* forget."

Elizabeth glanced around, as if a solution might come to hand, but the room had no windows. "Perhaps if we dressed him up as a servant—"

There was another knock at the door.

The three of them stared at each other in horror. Sparrow dove for the kneehole again, and Elizabeth cracked open the door. In came Beauclerk.

"You're lucky it's just me," he said. "What are you two doing shut up together like this? Mrs. Turner, your father is desperate to find you."

Elizabeth folded her arms. "Captain Norrington and I were just talking."

"Of course." Beauclerk's eyes crinkled with mirth. "Well, then?" He looked from one of them to the other. "The meat's already cold, but it'll soon be gone too. Shall we?"

James looked out into the passage. It was crowded with people on their way to supper, and the outer rooms were filled with servants cleaning up. Sparrow was trapped either way. James glanced helplessly at Elizabeth.

It occurred to him that the three most important people in his life were in that room: his idol and dearest friend; the woman he was trying fall out of love with; and—Sparrow. James had no idea what Sparrow meant to him.

Beauclerk was tapping his foot. Elizabeth gave James a conspiratorial look and came over to his side. "Very well," she said, and tugged his arm so that all three glasses of port toppled to the carpet.

James stared at the spreading stain and tried not to smile as he realized what she'd done.

"Oh, what a clumsy oaf I am!" she shrieked. "Lord Aubrey, do you think you could fetch a footman? This carpet is priceless and it must be taken out and cleaned this very instant." She batted her eyes. "Please?"

James was overwhelmed by a wave of love, horror, and pride.

Beauclerk nodded, puzzled, and stepped out the door. "Jack!" Elizabeth whispered. "Get over here!"

When Beauclerk returned with the footman, they found a rolled up carpet with a barely noticeable bulge in the middle. "I'll assist," said James, beating Beauclerk to the far end. It would be hard to explain why the thing was so heavy. "Aubrey, you'll take Mrs. Turner down to supper, won't you?"

Elizabeth gave him a radiant smile as he struggled with the footman to lift the unnaturally heavy carpet. He steered them out the front door, and once they'd set the carpet down on the front step, he sent the man inside for the housekeeper. As soon as they were alone, he shook out the carpet and sent Sparrow sprawling on the ground.

"Now get out of here!" he snapped.

"All right, all right. Don't have to tell me twice." Sparrow brushed himself off and melted into the bushes.

Inside, James found Elizabeth. "I don't want to talk about it," he said. "Not yet, at least. And not here."

"Very well." She gave him a secret smile.

Before he left, James stepped onto the veranda to try again for a moment of peace, and discovered Turner sitting on the stone balustrade, smoking a clay pipe.

Turner hopped down. "Commodore—"

"It's back to 'Captain', now, actually." James leaned on the balustrade. "'Commodore' is a post, not a rank."

"Oh, right. I keep forgetting." Turner got back up onto his seat. "I just think of you—you seem so —"

"Yes, yes." He sighed. "I'll choose the more flattering version of whatever you were trying to say."

They stood quietly for a minute.

"I didn't see you mingling with your guests," said James, rather unkindly.

Turner shook his head. "They're hardly my guests. I excused myself from dinner because Elizabeth didn't know where to put me in the seating chart."

"I half suspected." James smirked. "Having regrets?"

"You will never catch me complaining, Commodore, but it's trying at times."

James didn't correct him this time. "Yes, it's terribly trying, marrying a beautiful, vivacious woman who raises your station, increases your material comfort and admits you to society—"

Turner sighed. "Commodore, *you* grew up in this society, so it's all perfectly natural to you. Try to imagine what it's like for a man who's spent his life working with his hands, drinking in taverns and sleeping in hay lofts. You should hear the songs they sing, about my filthy blacksmith's hands touching—"

"Songs?" James blinked. "They sing songs about *you*?"

"What, you want to hear one?"

"No, thank you. It's just—" James laughed. "I thought I was the one they sang songs about."

"Bawdy tunes insulting the manhood of anybody with the nerve to fall in love are an equal opportunity affair, I think."

It was the first time Turner had acknowledged that they were rivals for Elizabeth's love, not just her hand. James found himself strangely comforted. At least one person didn't think he was heartless. "I won't tell you to ignore the talk," he said, "or that it can't harm you if you don't let it. It can. Just try to remember why you're putting up with it."

"As though I could ever forget it." Turner got a sickening look on his face, and their tender moment was over. James could only be so charitable to a man who had what he wanted.

Walking back toward his house, James looked out to sea. Turner might technically be the pirate, but Elizabeth was the restless one. James had once been like her—addicted to the lift of the deck under his feet as the wind freshened, sails spreading tight like drumheads, sheets and tacks snapping taut. As a boy, he'd stood in the forechains and watched with belly fluttering as the feather of spray at the bow renewed itself mile after mile. As he grew older, he began to see monotony where he'd seen beauty. The sea was nothing but a void, a pregnant vacuum into which they poured their dreams, a desert of wet and weed. It was a promise of freedom that always disappointed. Of course, by then it had trapped him just as Elizabeth had, in a love that could never be returned.

James stopped and looked out over the harbor bathed in moonlight. A man sacrificed all hope of belonging in the world when he went to sea, wandering the Earth without rest like the Jew who taunted Christ. The sailor who married was even worse off, leaving his heart on land, never truly home. James wasn't even married, and still his heart felt separate, lost somewhere in those thousands of miles of wake. Perhaps it would end one day—but something told him that love, should he ever find any, would only make it worse.

Sparrow seemed immune. He ran away from the very things James wanted—love, loyalty, a place to return to. All the man wanted was his ship. He wasn't loyal to James, certainly. It had been silly to let loyalty enter into it; they were using each other, quite simply. Yet always, James's nature resisted. Always, he longed for friendship—even Sparrow's.

The word "Cartagena" rang in Jack's ears. That was it, then—Norrington would have him put off his own concerns yet again. Jack didn't give a fig whether the English took Cartagena or not. The thought of Norrington going in there under the command of that fool of an admiral gave him a feeling like indigestion, but it wasn't as though he cared—Norrington could get himself blown to bits for all it meant to him. He'd go to Havana alone, as he should have done from the start.

Outside the mansion, crouching in the sweet stinking bower of a hibiscus bush, he took out his compass. Havana was northwest-half-north from Port Royal; Cartagena was south-south-east. Facing into the north, he closed his eyes, let the compass spin, and looked down.

The red fleur-de-lis was still turning. It paused at the bearings of both cities, then after a few moments, it settled on northeast-by-east. What the hell lay northeast-by-east? Jack pictured a chart of the Caribbean. Oh, right. Tortuga.

So apparently, faced with the choice between marching into battle for his not-friend or dashing off on a forlorn-hope mission to recover his ship, what he wanted most was to say "sod off" to both and get blind stinking drunk.

Sometimes this damn compass was no help at all.

Norrington would be fine without him. Vernon's forces would outnumber Lezo's three to one; the English would be in and out in no time. Sneaking highly recognizable vessels out of heavily defended naval bases was Jack's specialty—he didn't need help, and Norrington could take care of his own lily-white arse for a change.

Bloody Norrington. Goddamned, thrice-cursed, motherfucking *Norrington*.

Looking down on the tranquil forest of spars in the harbor and then out to sea, Jack's heart clenched around the hole where his ship had been. Without a consort, the sea was nothing but empty miles; with the *Black Pearl*, it was an endless adventure. The sea meant never having to stop. With a ship, the sea was life constantly renewed, never dull.

So he'd always thought. The world had changed when he wasn't looking, and now, like a sailor easing down the helm, he was shifting course. Behind him, the Governor's mansion blazed like a saint's day mass as he turned back toward town. He crept up alleys and around the side of Norrington's dark house to climb into the study, where he scribbled a note and left it on the blotter, then headed back down to the harbor to look for a ride. Life had forced him to choose again, but he was ready for it. The day he had regrets was the day he stopped being Captain Jack Sparrow.

In which England goes to war

7 February, 1741

"The ship is fast at her mooring, sir," said Lieutenant Forrest, climbing the stairs to the quarterdeck.

James scanned the ships up and down the mountainous green coast of Hispaniola. Nearest to them was the *Princess Louisa*, Captain Stapleton's new command, and Vernon's supply tender, the *Goodley*. Most of the ships had been there for days; Vernon's division, of which James was a part, had only just arrived. "Care to play another move or two?" James asked his lieutenant.

The chess board was set up in James's day cabin under an open stern window. With orders to the officer of the watch to notify them if the Admiral signaled, Forrest followed James below and took his seat behind the white pieces, his heavy black brows settling into a cloudy bank. He had no sense of humor that James had been able to detect, and he did not like to lose, even in a low-stakes war.

James did not play for pleasure, either—this was an intelligence mission. He needed to learn Forrest's mind, and games of strategy were one way to do so. The other was to observe how he handled the men, and James was satisfied so far that Forrest was humane, decisive and astute. His defaulters' list was always short, and the *Dauntless* still had the fastest broadside in the squadron even after Ogle had siphoned half the able seamen off the books. But none of this told James how far he could take Forrest into his confidence.

James studied the white pieces. Forrest paid close attention to his pawn structure, which spoke well; he would not be caught unprepared. Right now, his beetle-wing eyes were darting around, returning again and again to his bishop and James's rook. He was hesitant to trade pieces even when he won the exchange, which did not speak as well. With a sigh of bereavement, Forrest took the rook, and James took his bishop. To James's nod of concession, he returned a tight smile.

The *Princess Caroline* signaled for James to repair aboard, but his men had barely hoisted out his barge before the lookout cried, "On deck, there! Sail ho!"

James reached the flagship just in time to meet Captain Dandridge of the *Wolf* sloop, who'd just come from Port Louis. Everyone gathered in Vernon's stateroom for his report.

"I was five miles out and the haze made it devilish difficult to see," said Dandridge, "but I'm fairly certain there were nineteen ships of war, one flying a broad pendant and another with a flag at her main topmast."

"D'Antin," said Vernon. "Damn him. Haze, you say?" He waved Watson over. "Get Laws in the *Spence* to sail in past the Isle de Vache and get us some confirmation. I'm not taking my entire squadron into Port Louis until we know for sure what's there."

Dandridge looked bewildered, uncertain whether his information had been accepted or rejected. James thought about inviting him for dinner, but he barely knew the man, and he was irritated that they'd been there a week already with no news and now they'd have to wait at least a week more. He returned to his ship alone.

15 February, 1741

A week later, the squadron sat off the Isle de Vache, and James and Gillette stood on the *Princess*

Caroline's quarterdeck with the Admiral. Everyone was mopping their faces with handkerchiefs. "Remember," said Vernon, "just ask them if we can wood and water in the bay; no spilling information. All you want is a good look at what's in that harbor. Damn this haze."

It was certainly a good defense. James wondered if they could order up a haze for Port Royal.

"It would probably behoove us to apologize for the way we treated that messenger the French governor sent us yesterday," said Gillette with amusement.

"If you must," Vernon shrugged. "Now get moving. If d'Antin is there, you'll need to escape quickly. If he isn't, well, Cartagena calls."

Later, Gillette sat beside James in the stern sheets of the *Dauntless's* barge as it bore them across the undulating bay. Pascal Point fell away to larboard and the harbor opened up, still and quiet, chimneys smoking in the thick air.

"Can you see anything?" Gillette asked James.

"It's still too hazy." He collapsed the spyglass.

When a boat rowed out to meet them, James dusted off his French to request an audience with the Governor. As they sailed toward shore, he took out his glass again. After a few moments, he grimaced.

"Sir?" said Gillette.

James handed over the glass. "Merchantmen," he muttered. "Unrigged. One frigate of forty guns—but do you see that white house behind it?"

Gillette squinted through the glass. "Aye."

"Do you see the gable at its east end, somewhat in line with the frigate's mainmast, that if we were a mile farther out might begin to resemble a flag?"

Gillette laughed.

On shore, they spoke with the Governor, strewing their poor French with all the honorifics they knew, and got permission to wood and water in the surrounding bays. There was no sign of a battle squadron anywhere.

"Sorry for our rude to messenger," James said in French to the Governor, puffing carefully on the cigar the man had insisted he take.

The man shrugged. "We know all about Admiral Vernon. He was no different when he was your age."

Back aboard his ship, James met Forrest on deck. "Lord Aubrey is waiting for you below," said Forrest. "And—look, there." He pointed to a trim twenty-gun sloop anchored near the *Princess Caroline*.

James studied her. "Who's that?"

"The *Experiment*, sir," said Forrest, "late from England. She met d'Antin on the way, said the French sailed from here on the twenty-sixth of January."

"Oh, for God's sake." James rubbed his temple. "What a waste of time this has all been."

"Her captain is Rentone, sir," offered Forrest.

James looked up.

Dauntless signaled to *Experiment*, and ten minutes later, fair, freckled Rentone came over the side, blushing and grinning at the whistle of the boatswain's pipes.

"Mr. Rentone." James shook the young man's hand, smiling. "Or *Captain*, I should say."

"Yes, sir!" Rentone beamed. "Thank you, sir! I'm not used to it—I reckon a fellow could say 'Captain Rentone!' in the street and I'd not turn around."

James was certain he'd never been this young. "You were well treated in England, I trust?"

"Well treated! You'd have thought I was the Queen of Sheba. There's only so much humble protesting you can do, telling 'em you're just the messenger *et cetera*, before you just—well—"

"Before you decide to enjoy it while it lasts." James clapped his shoulder. "Pray come and join Lord Aubrey Beauclerk and I. We'll catch you up on what you've missed."

Rentone's eyes widened at Beauclerk's name. It wasn't every day that a clockmaker's son sat at table with a grandchild of Charles II.

"So you're the crack pilot," said Beauclerk, standing and jostling Rentone with a vigorous handshake. He smiled his broad, generous smile. "I'll bet you dined with the First Lord!"

"I did, sir." Rentone went a bit pale. "I've never been so terrified in my life."

"This is just the beginning for you. Sit down, both of you."

Beauclerk and Don Blas had one thing in common: the story was their chief weapon. Beauclerk, however, used stories to put people at ease.

"...and I looked away from the men flooding into the waist just in time to see a Turk bearing down on me, brandishing a great bloody scimitar over his head—I thought I was done for—and then he drops to the deck like a sack of flour, and Lieutenant Norrington is standing behind him with cutlass in hand, looking just as shocked as the dead Turk. I never realized it was possible to feel so many things at once. You'd never know to look at him, but Norrington has that effect on people."

James hid a grin behind a sip of port. "'Never know to look at him'?"

Beauclerk laughed. "It's just that you're so responsible, Norry. You're not like me, blundering through life without a heed for anyone else."

Rentone's eyes were darting eagerly back and forth. He'd heard the exciting version of the Turkish pirates story, of course. Perhaps Don Blas would have been more impressed if Beauclerk had told it.

"Oh! I nearly forgot!" Rentone rummaged in his coat pocket and drew out a handful of copper medallions, which he dropped on the table.

One rolled and fell flat beside James's plate. He picked it up. On one side was a relief of six ships; on the other, two men in profile.

"It's you, sir!" said Rentone. "You and Admiral Vernon!"

"The devil you say!" Beauclerk reached for one of the medallions. "I've only seen the ones showing Vernon alone. If I'd known they'd made some with your handsome physz on 'em, I'd have collected a few more." He squinted at the medallion. "This one's got Walpole on it, for heaven's sake. What's he doing with this satyr?" He cast it down and picked up another. "Ah, here we are. *Admiral Vernon and Commodore Norrington. They took Portobello with six ships.* More direct than imaginative, certainly. They got your nose right, at least."

James squinted at his medallion. It was neither a good nor a bad likeness of him, being just an outline. He hoped the skinnier figure was intended to be him. The words 'Commodore Norrington' were scrunched close together, as though the artist had run out of room.

"Still and all," Beauclerk went on to Rentone, "there's something you must know about this dashing hero: he's got an absolute horror of chickens..."

It was so thrilling to hear Beauclerk call him "dashing" that James quite forgot what lies were being told about him.

"Here I go on about us," Beauclerk declared after wrapping up the story of the chicken coop. "Rentone, you must tell me of your life."

"Well—I—" Rentone's easily flushed face went as red as the port. "It's only just started. I don't have any stories yet, certainly."

"You mustn't feel a need to match Lord Aubrey's compulsive storytelling," James put in. "He's quite able to amuse himself."

"Well, then—" Rentone fortified himself with a large sip, "—I suppose all I can say is I owe everything to Admiral Vernon."

James and Beauclerk exchanged a glance. It was too brief for James to be sure what he saw. "I do think it is your own abilities that you ought to be thanking," he said carefully.

"I should hope so—I mean, I get on as well as the next fellow, I suppose—but all I did was pilot a ship, and for that Admiral Vernon gave me a command and sent me home to be wined and dined and made post—it was above and beyond, certainly."

"Like any commander," said Beauclerk, "the Admiral sees young men of talent and rewards them with the expectation that they will be loyal to him. You mustn't see it as selfless."

"To be sure—I should be honored to think so—nevertheless—"

"Rentone here could sail blind from Galleon Passage to the Bay of Campeche," said James.

Rentone blushed again and ducked his head. "I, um, don't suppose I could trouble either of you for a tale about the sort of man Admiral Vernon is..."

James and Beauclerk traded another look. This time there was amusement in Beauclerk's eyes. "Of course," he said, cracking his knuckles in preparation for another tale. "You know of course that he's one of our great tactical innovators, and perhaps you also know that before you were even born he was fighting the Spanish off Cartagena just as we're about to do..."

James listened and said nothing. His loathing of Vernon was burning a hole in his breast—but such was the loneliness of command. He was surrounded by good men just as he was surrounded by water: he could drink none of it, and he could confide in none of them.

2 March, 1741

"Captain Elizagaray," James sighed. "I trust you are well?"

"I don't know what you hope to accomplish by dragging me along on this damned expedition," Don Pedro grumbled.

"The Admiral thinks you might be of some use," James shrugged. "As a bargaining chip, perhaps. Or," he smiled, "maybe he intends to torture you for information."

"It's torture enough stuck in this airless cabin eating your maggoty salt meat and drinking your watered-down wine."

"Good. I shall expect a stream of information shortly, then."

Don Pedro sneered. "Get me some fresh mutton and I might tell you something. And tell me where we are!"

James ignored him. "I think you'll be quite comfortable down here with your servant to attend to your every whim. As always, alert me when you're ready to be of some use. Good day."

Had Don Pedro been able to look outside, he'd have seen Playa Grande off the *Dauntless's* larboard bow, and the *Experiment* and *Spence* sloops coming up from the south, where they had been scouting for deserters and safe anchorages. James installed himself in his great cabin and waited for the reports.

Captain Laws of the *Spence* arrived first. "I checked the usual spots, sir," he said, "but nothing from our spies. However, we found this gentleman."

A sour man in a tartan coat stepped into the cabin. "Well, well," said James with narrowed eyes, "if it isn't Captain Margrave."

The man had the sense to cast his eyes down. For over a year, James had listened to his spite and complaints, and now it was time for a little payback.

"What did you say to me once?" said James, drawing the feather of his quill along his chin. "'What kind of Englishman are you?' And now I find you trading with the Spanish during wartime. Do you have any idea how much trouble you're in, Margrave?"

"Just tell me what you want and you'll have it," Margrave blurted.

James smiled.

Over the course of four bells and three cups of coffee, Margrave submitted his local knowledge, talking until James's clerk was on the verge of collapse. Finally, James sent Margrave back to his ship with orders to remain at Playa Grande, then passed the word for his barge to be put out. He had one final errand.

By the time the boat's keel crunched in the sand, he was in the water, striding toward the beach. The sky over the bluff was lavender. "Tell Lieutenant Forrest I've gone up for a better view of the bay," he said to the midshipman at his elbow. "There's no need to follow me." Without breaking stride, he made for the tree line.

It was a ten-minute climb up the familiar stony path, dusty and hot and choked with insects. By the time he reached open space, his clothes had been snagged by the brush and his stockings

hopelessly stained with red mud. On the cliff, the light breeze off the sea cooled his sweaty neck, and he looked around for the marks. Two box trees grew close together, and in line with them was a row of stunted palms. He followed them inland.

After five minutes weaving between bushes with his eyes on his battered old surveyor's compass, he smelled something burning. A few minutes after that, he heard singing. The tuneless sounds resolved into words.

"...her hair was green as seaweed, her skin was blue and pale..."

James stepped out of the brush into a clearing where a camp fire burned. Next to it, amid the remains of a roasted fish dinner with his head pillowed on driftwood, Sparrow sprawled, singing to the bottle atop his belly. *"...I loved that girl with all me heart, but I only liked the upper part... could do without the tail..."* He looked up. "Gov'nor!" he exclaimed, then grew cross. "Nice of you to show up—I'd started to wonder if my note had fallen into enemy hands."

James sat on a log. "Vernon needed to be convinced that d'Antin had well and truly gone."

"I showed you he had, didn't I?"

"A single letter wasn't quite good enough; surely you see that."

Sparrow shrugged soberly. Then he lit up. "I stole you a present."

James narrowed his eyes. "As long as it's not English."

Sparrow reached into a canvas sack near his foot and drew out a bottle of ruby liquid. James's eyes glazed over. "What's...what's that?"

"Oh," shrugged Sparrow, "just a bit of Chateau Margaux I found in Port Louis. The streets were fairly runnin' with the stuff, an' I thought, 'What a perfect way to butter up the Commodore.'"

James's mouth watered. He hesitated, but Sparrow's face contained nothing but guileless expectation. It was a strange look on him, and it made James uneasy. Equal exchange and mutual self-interest were one thing; gifts were quite another. He took the bottle. "Whatever your motives, I shan't turn it away," he said with a sigh, the bewitching red glint in the foggy glass already eroding his will.

"Knew you had a worldly weakness in there somewhere." Sparrow grinned, pleased with himself.

They clinked their bottles together.

"On to business," said James, clearing his throat. "We must first establish how we will communicate. Obviously it will be difficult for us to meet with any regularity—"

"Don't let's get ahead of ourselves," said Sparrow, holding up a hand. "The first order of business is not how we'll do it, but how I'll be compensated for doin' it, savvy?"

"Very well." James gave Sparrow a look. "Well? You know more about dishonest bookkeeping than I do."

"I'll make off with what I can carry in the melee, of course, as I always do," said Sparrow, settling back with the ease of a born negotiator, "but in addition—one half of your prize share."

"One *half*?" James gaped. "Never mind my own future comfort—that amount of money would be

missed, Sparrow!"

"Tell 'em you invested it," Sparrow shrugged.

James glared. "One fifth."

Sparrow glared back. "One third."

"Two sevenths."

Sparrow frowned, doing the arithmetic in his head. "Nope," he said at last, "it's one third or nothing."

"Fine." James ground his teeth. "This is ridiculous."

Sparrow grinned. "Think of it this way—I'll be far more eager to protect your interests."

"I should jolly well hope you'd be eager," muttered James. "Now, let's stop salivating over this money we don't yet have and figure out what we're going to do."

"Well said. Now—" Sparrow rubbed his hands together. "Lucky for you, I've infiltrated Lezo's staff." He held up his hand. "It's best if I don't tell you how. Plausible deniability an' all that. Or is that plausible accountability?"

"You and accountability don't belong in the same sentence."

"Fair enough." Sparrow flashed a grin. "I can furnish you with all I know about the Spanish defenses at present. After that, we must find a way to exchange information."

"Again," said James, "I bow to your experience."

Sparrow eyed him. "Wish I could get that in writing. Now, with these prevailin' winds, your stern'll be facin' away from shore, so you'll have to hang a lantern off the quarter gallery to signal when you want to meet."

"All right." James shrugged. "And how will you signal me?"

"I'll leave a sign for you somewhere, flag over a tree branch or that kind of nonsense. Any idea where you'll be landin'?"

"I'm recommending the place where Admiral Pointis landed in '97. Whether Vernon and Wentworth accept it is another matter."

"We'll need rendezvous points on Tierra Bomba. You know where that is, right? Big bloody island blocking the approach to the harbor?"

"Yes, I know where Tierra Bomba is, I've been surveying this coast on and off for the last two years. So, where do you recommend? Somewhat north of the Chamba battery on the leeward side, I would think."

"I know just the place." Sparrow dug around in the sack and pulled out a vast crumpled sheet of vellum. "We also need a spot on the opposite side once you get inside the harbor..."

With Sparrow's chart spread between them, they slogged through signals and codes, rendezvous and drop points, protocols and contingency plans, while Sparrow drank liberally from his bottle.

"Are you even going to remember this?" James asked, wrinkling his nose at the fumes wafting across the chart.

"I'm sober as a parson," said Sparrow, eyes slightly crossed.

James shook his head. "Now, what can you tell me about the fortifications at the harbor mouth?"

"First of all, you know there's two harbor mouths, but only one you can use, six miles south of the city."

"Yes, yes, of course—Boca Chica. We've secured a few Spanish charts, but it's treacherous; only one ship may pass at a time."

"An' it's bristling with guns on either side. Tierra Bomba on the north side of the channel is where their biggest fort lies. Isla Baru to the south has a few as well, but only one of 'em's maintained with much effort—the Barradera. Anyway, the big fort on Tierra Bomba, which you call Boca Chica Castle, mounts eighty-two guns, an' Lezo's put all his hopes there. For good measure, he's anchored four big ships just inside the harbor mouth, an' stretched a boom of chains, cables and beams of wood across the whole channel. You'll have to cut it to get in, and you'll have to silence those guns to cut it. Lezo knows you have the superior strength—he aims to throw enough little stones in your path to keep you busy until the rainy season starts droppin' your men like flies. Speed, speed is what will beat him, remember that."

"How are you so sure?" asked James with a suspicious scowl. "Just how close have you cozened yourself to Lezo, anyway?"

"It's my secret, but let's just say I'm in a position to hear men at their least inhibited." To James's look of delicate horror, he said, "Remember, Gov'nor, you pay me to be dishonest for you."

"I have always held myself responsible for whatever you've done in my name," sniffed James.

"I ought to keep some responsibility for meself. I take much better care of it."

James rolled his eyes. "If by that you mean you ignore it."

"Precisely. You know," said Sparrow wistfully, "it is far easier to move amongst the Spanish. They wear beards, you see..."

Listening to Sparrow's prattle, James was aware that something was different, and it dawned on him that he had never been in Sparrow's company for this long without wanting to throttle him or stuff a rag down his gullet. He was almost, dare he say it, enjoying himself. Sparrow had not ceased to be an unwashed, amoral tatterdemalion, a pungent creature from the gutter with tar in every possible crack and crevice, but at some point, James had ceased to find him repulsive. Had, perhaps, never truly found him so at all. Sparrow seemed to charm everybody in the end, even his enemies. James gazed in dismay at the bottle in his lap and wondered when he had become so easy to manipulate.

They talked until the light had gone from the sky and James began to worry he'd be missed. Sparrow kicked his campfire out and disappeared into the brush, and James stumbled back down to the beach.

Two days later, the bay of Playa Grande was strewn with the mighty English fleet, and a council of war convened aboard the *Princess Caroline*. The first thing James saw as he came aboard was the unwelcome face of Lieutenant Lowther. Turned out in his best uniform, Lowther still had the red-rimmed, mucose eyes of the perpetually sleepless or drunk, and although his roguish person invited

comparison with Sparrow, his face was devoid of Sparrow's cleverness. One tooth glinted in an impertinent grin as he led James below.

Vernon's stateroom was full. James had never before met with all the principle land and sea officers at once, and while he refused to be awed by them, he was uncomfortable being the least powerful man in the room.

"Pointis's old landing place is still the best," he said when his turn came. "The batteries commanding the bay can be easily reduced by two or three ships, and the fire from Boca Chica Castle and Lezo's ships inside the channel cannot reach."

"Very well," nodded Vernon. "Here is the plan, gentlemen: Rear-Admiral Ogle's division shall lead as we sail down the coast. We'll detach three ships to reduce each of those batteries. Once they've been silenced, General Wentworth shall begin landing his troops under cover of fire from the fleet. Then we shall make swift work of Boca Chica Castle, lest the rainy season catch up to us. We shall work out the particulars in due course. Questions?"

Everyone was agreed.

"Now, on to a subject I'm sure we're all eager to discuss: how exactly the booty from this jewel in the Spanish crown shall be divided..."

James sat back and let his mind wander. He had no influence in this discussion. Only the principle officers had anything at stake; everyone else would get the same share as always. Something in his cautious nature found the whole exercise foolish—why waste energy dividing up sums one had not yet earned? Vernon's optimism was limitless, bubbling up like fumes from his arrogance and blindness. Somehow Sparrow's cheerful counting of future riches didn't offend him nearly as much—perhaps because it was nothing but a breezy, harmless dream. Vernon's appetites came from darker places.

9 March, 1741

James sent his steward below for another cup of coffee and watched the low forests of Tierra Bomba creep by, the green mass deep in shadow as the new sun spilled over the tree tops. By the first bell in the forenoon, the wind had freshened and backed to the north, blowing fine on their quarter, their larboard tacks aboard. To leeward, sails were spread across the sea, all crawling down the coast at a stately pace.

The jungle seemed unaware that there was such a thing as man. Watching it, James spared a bit of anxiety for Sparrow. Despite their long conference, he didn't actually have any idea what Sparrow was *doing*. The man was a master of self-preservation, notwithstanding a few failures, so it was bootless to worry about him when there were so many other things to worry about. Still, Sparrow peppered his cleverness with bouts of idiocy. Perhaps he was with Lezo now, in some preposterous disguise; or perhaps he was creeping around Boca Chica Castle where he might be cornered in an instant. James tried to keep his mind on the situation at hand, though there wasn't much to do; this morning would be a few moments of action for a handful of ships, while the rest came along for a show of strength.

Guns sounded in the distance, and James went up to the forecastle to watch the *Princess Amelia* hammer a tiny shore battery into silence. The big ship set her anchor and sent blue smoke curling across the water for fifteen minutes before ship and battery went quiet. She weighed her anchor to rejoin the line just as the *Dauntless* passed her beam.

Close to noon, half a league to the south, the *Princess Caroline* signaled. An hour later, the *Dauntless* rode at anchor with her spring cable set, the strange northerly wind blowing on her beam.

The sun was nearly overhead, and the men's skins glistened with sweat, relieved occasionally by the gusting breeze. Three ships had taken up positions near the landing place, firing on the batteries commanding the bay. James moved his glass from one ship to the other. *Norfolk* was the most northerly, anchored four cable's lengths from Fort Santiago, her broadside roaring in slow periods. South of her and to windward lay the *Russell*, exchanging fire with Fort San Felipe. In the very south was the *Shrewsbury*, Captain Townsend's ship, dividing her fire between San Felipe and Boca Chica Castle inside the harbor mouth. The gunfire rolled across the water like thunder, and soon it was hard to make out the coast through the smoke.

This was to be his day, then; waiting and watching unless he got the signal to stand in. He trained his glass on the forts. Once they were abandoned, the troops could land with little to fear from the castle, and from there, an assault on the castle would be easy, as long as nothing went wrong. Of course, something always went wrong. He could hear Vernon's bluster about those idiot Spaniards and their cowardly defense—the castle would fall by tea time, he surely thought.

Bored and frustrated, James went below to occupy himself with the log book. Not long afterward, an equally restless Forrest joined him to exchange a few moves of chess. Around two o'clock, there was a knock on the door.

"Sir!" The fourth lieutenant stepped into the cabin. "You may want to come above; something's happening."

"That is without a doubt the vaguest report I've ever received," said James, getting to his feet.

On the forecastle, James trained his spyglass on the *Shrewsbury*. "Oh, God," he said, handing the glass to Forrest.

One of her anchor cables had been cut, and she had swung round in a great arc to leeward, pointing her stern into the south. James could hear guns from the island fort of San Josef in the channel, and perhaps also from the Barradera. The ships inside the harbor were firing now too, up and over the sandbar. Three forts and four ships were now raking the *Shrewsbury's* stern.

"Her mizzenmast is gone already," said Forrest grimly, still looking through the glass. "She's taken many shots between wind and water as well, with the way she's heeling. Why doesn't Townsend warp her back into position?"

James squinted at the beleaguered ship; from a distance, only the angle of her masts signaled her distress. "The fire's too hot," he said. "Under heavy raking fire like that, you can barely keep your head down, let alone man a capstan or lower a boat. Her stern will be demolished in twenty minutes and her masts gone in an hour."

They went up to the poop deck to survey the rest of the fleet. Nothing was moving. No signals from the Admiral; no one was being ordered to take *Shrewsbury's* position. Surely it was just a matter of time before the Admiral ordered her off?

There was nothing he could do, yet it seemed callous to return to his business with so many men losing their lives just a mile away. James and his officers gathered on the forecastle in a vigil, watching the poor *Shrewsbury* holding fast with sick horror as more and more of her was blown away.

The hands were piped to supper and the rum ration served out. Afterwards, men crowded the waist to watch the *Shrewsbury* in silence. James ate mechanically, and came back on deck; still the *Shrewsbury* held. He knew what it would look like aboard her: decks slick with blood, limbs and guts and shattered bodies heaved overboard without ceremony, screams and groans and sweaty powder-black bodies sponging and loading and heaving on tackles as the shots sent splinters everywhere; smoke and din and hellish chaos. There was no reason for it—a senseless, stupid waste.

Just as the sun was setting, the *Princess Caroline* signaled. Immediately *Shrewsbury* cut her cable, and in what must have been an act of extreme heroism, set a bit of canvas on a jury-rigged mast and stood out to rejoin the squadron, heeling drunkenly. "Mr. Forrest," said James, putting away his glass, "lower the launch and take twenty men to aid Captain Townsend, if you please."

"Aye, sir." Forrest looked relieved as he saluted and hurried off.

After Forrest left, the bomb-ketches moved into position to cover the landing of the troops, and then the transports followed, disgorging their human cargo into boats that skittered down great waves onto the beach. The muzzle flashes from the bomb-ketches were brilliant in the heavy dusk. James struggled to discern the action on the ground. Through his spyglass, he could make out men swarming over the recently abandoned forts, and still the boats came, struggling ashore with wave after wave of soldiers.

A little past midnight, Forrest staggered back aboard covered in blood and soaked to the thighs in bilge water. "Reporting, sir," he said, entering James's cabin. "Captain Townsend sends his thanks." He paused. "Twenty men dead and forty wounded, and 240 shots to the hull."

James watched Forrest's face carefully. It was tired and frustrated, but otherwise difficult to read. They both hated what Vernon had done, he knew. Could he confide in this young man?

Of course he couldn't—he was the captain. He had no right to drag his lieutenant into his personal nightmare of conflicted loyalty. Any man who wanted authority over other men paid for it with isolation; he'd known that when he chose this life. There was no turning from it now.

In which James's life is made difficult

11 March, 1741

"...now that the last of the supplies have been landed, the ground cleared, the kitchens, necessities and officers' huts built, pickets posted, openings of communication laid..."

General Wentworth rattled on as though expecting to be interrupted, hands on the table, eyes darting back and forth. To his left sat Brigadier Guise and Brigadier Blakeny, who were leaning their heads together and whispering. Every so often, Wentworth sent an anxious glance their way. James felt sorry for him.

"Might I ask you something, General?" said Vernon with that false politeness James had learned to dread. "How long were you intending to camp here? Because these preparations suggest you mean to be here for a month or more, not the few days it will take to reduce that fort."

Wentworth's jaw moved without a sound. "Not long, of course," he said at last, "but it is standard procedure to—"

"Standard procedure might work in Spain," said Ogle, "but in the tropics, with a pestilential rainy season on the way, we must hang the book."

Wentworth blinked furiously. "I am bound by the General Regulations and Orders—"

"At least explain to us why you pitched your camp in such a damn foolish place," snapped Vernon, "and why you're raising a battery of twenty guns when it's obvious that Boca Chica Castle could be carried by a hundred soldiers with scaling ladders."

"Now look here," said Wentworth, turning puce, "I consulted long with my chief engineer for the best placement of my camp and my battery, and if you gentlemen want to discuss the matter with him—"

Vernon caught James's eye. "Captain Norrington, you've some experience in this area. Tell me your opinion on the location of General Wentworth's camp."

James lifted his head from where he'd been leaning it on his hand. "The ground is swampy and exposed to all the elements. It is directly in the Spanish line of fire, especially now that the battery is built in front of it and stray enemy shot pass over into the tents. On top of this, the elaborate sentry system that has been posted around the perimeter is a waste of valuable manpower."

Wentworth glared bitterly at James, who gave him a shrug and a thin smile. The General had lost his respect by blaming the engineers, so James felt no remorse.

"I hardly think," said Wentworth, mustering a bit of spirit for the first time, "that a sea captain of no great experience even in his own element has any right to judge in these matters."

"If you insist on building this ridiculous battery that you don't need," Vernon went on as though he hadn't heard, "you have five days to do it, and another day after that to make a breach and carry that castle. Otherwise, you may not count on the support of the fleet. Am I quite clear?"

"I'll need more men landed!" cried Wentworth. "How do you expect me to do it if—"

"You could try putting shovels in the hands of those sentries who are protecting us from a sneak

attack that's not going to come," said Ogle.

Wentworth slapped his hands down on the table and stood. "I've had enough of your harping, gentlemen," he said with a trembling lip. "I've—I've had quite enough. You can send your complaints to my secretary. Otherwise, I have work to do. Good day." He stomped out of the tent and flung the flap after him.

Once they were back outside, Vernon took James's shoulder. "I want you watching that chief engineer," he muttered. "Make nice, find out what Wentworth's not telling us. I want to know when and how he's wasting our time. Understood?"

James nodded. He was already tired of being "adjutant to the Admiral"—like "acting" or "unofficial" anything, it meant all the responsibility with none of the extra pay or respect. In this case, it meant being trapped between two egotists too proud to fight their battles face to face. He only hoped this engineer would be just as unhappy with his position in the middle as James was.

A few questions in the camp led him to the man. Captain Jonas Moore was stocky and fiftyish, with a plain face and small, lively eyes. In comparison to the Infantry officers, he had a manner of blank concentration about him; it was clear to look at him that he spent most of his time doing his job. James found him supervising the digging of the trench that would form the counterscarp of the great battery, bent over a plan and muddy to the knees.

"Norrington?" he said, standing up and blinking. "No relation to Lieutenant-Colonel Norrrington who was at Gibraltar in '04, by any chance?"

"I am his son, sir."

Moore broke into a grin. "Why, I knew you as a baby!" He laughed, studying James's face. "I recall your father holding you on his knee with plans and profiles spread out, teaching you about horizontal curves and planes of reference."

James smiled. "I mustn't have been much of a student."

"You were an inquisitive little thing, I remember that." Moore folded up his plan and eased himself down onto a stump. "You hadn't much use for drawings, but your father's surveying instruments fascinated you no end. I see you didn't follow him into the corps."

"He did not wish me to. But I have read enough in engineering that Admiral Vernon thinks me a competent liaison."

"Ah." It was clear what Moore thought of that notion. "The Admiral will expect independent reports, then? I have enough trouble explaining matters to General Wentworth."

James knelt. "He just wants to understand the situation," he said, pitching his voice low. "His information is filtered, and as such—"

"No, no, I see what's going on." Moore waved a hand. "It's not your fault, lad. If the General and the Admiral want to fight a little war of their own, it shouldn't keep us from doing our jobs. Tell him what you think you need to, but consider doing a bit of filtering of your own. You can start by telling him we need more men as soon as he can land them."

"I was afraid you were going to say that." James rubbed his temple. "Let us assume for the moment that you have all the men it is possible for you to have. What else would aid you?"

Moore looked like he was going to argue, but he shut his mouth and thought. "Supplies," he said at

last. "The men are falling ill left and right. I know the Admiral has fresher food and cleaner water somewhere on those supply-tenders. My men are sitting on the beach straining putrid water in pork tubs through sand; they'd work a lot faster if they didn't have to bother."

"A fair point." James frowned. "I'm afraid I have to be blunt—is there anything *I* can do, without the participation of the fleet?"

Moore nodded slowly. "So the Admiral thinks I'll be hurried along by one Navy captain with a passing knowledge of mines and outworks?"

James drew back. "Now, look here, there is no need to—"

"Captain Norrington, please understand," sighed Moore, "that every one of us is weary to his bones, and the last thing we want is another fellow getting in our way. If you can offer us more men or supplies, we'd be grateful. If not, then let us get back to work so we can raise this battery before we all drop dead of the fever."

"Is there nothing I can do?" James pleaded. "I don't have your experience, but—"

"Here's what you can do." Moore leaned close. "Take a tour through the site with me, then go back and tell Vernon exactly why the battery can't be raised unless he lands more troops. The more detail, the better. If he won't listen to the General, maybe he'll listen to an expert opinion from his own camp. Will you do that?"

"Of course." James bowed. "Lead on, sir."

Moore spoke with the frankness of the irreplaceable, and James was exceedingly envious. He still didn't know how replaceable he was to Vernon and he didn't intend to find out. In the meantime, he lived vicariously.

"...and these are the emplacements of the mortars, of course," said Moore, stepping over a picket, "fifteen feet from the interior crest, which you can see staked off there..."

James observed the network of stakes and string. "What are you using for the revetments?"

"I've got the men cutting brushwood to make fascines," said Moore. "Unless you'd recommend sod."

James shook his head. "The soil is far too wet. And you must remember to cut the fascines smaller than you would in Europe; tropical wood is far more dense. I recommend brush from the mangrove tree."

"All right, all right." Moore was looking at him and smiling. "You can stay, I suppose."

James took his report to Vernon later that day. It was time to find out just how much weight his professional opinion had, or whether his expertise was only of use when he was making a fool of Wentworth.

The Admiral listened to his report patiently. "He wants sixteen hundred men," Vernon observed when James was done, nodding to himself as he studied the thin layer of brandy in his glass. "He told you this himself?"

"He did, sir." James took a breath. "I examined the site, and I cannot see how he could manage with any less."

"Sixteen hundred men." Vernon nodded again. "Along with tents, supplies, provisions, and tools for the lot." He tugged on his lip. "Norrington," he said, "do you have any idea, in that simple, linear brain of yours, how thoroughly the Army is trying to screw us?"

James blinked. "While my experience with field fortifications is not extensive, I'm capable of assessing whether—"

"You are not!" Vernon shouted. "You saw what that charlatan wanted you to see! He and Wentworth know how to feed a line that honest fools like yourself will buy, because they think we're all stupid—"

"Sir." James drew a deep breath, fighting the rising fury that was suggesting all sorts of nasty things to say. "Whatever you may believe about the General's motives, the fact is that he has decided to raise a battery, and it will not be finished unless we help."

"The fact, Norrington," sneered Vernon, "is that Wentworth is afraid to send his men against that fort without a breach because he's an incompetent idiot! But he'll do it, by God, he'll do it if Admiral Ogle and I have to hold his feet in hot coals."

James opened his mouth to argue, but that mad light was back in Vernon's eye, the same one Don Blas's letter had lit. The matter had become personal. Vernon was right; James was, at bottom, a simple man, if simple meant lacking the desire to play games—especially ones that wasted time and lives. So he shut his mouth, and left to make his own plans.

Two hours later, James was seeing the last of a company of seamen into the *Dauntless's* boats.

"The captain of the *Pompey's* compliments, sir," said Lieutenant Forrest, hurrying up to the quarterdeck. "He'll begin putting supplies ashore as soon as we can lend him our boats."

James nodded. "See to it as soon as the men are ashore."

As his barge rowed toward the beach, James cast a glance in the direction of the *Princess Caroline*. If the Admiral suspected what he was about, he'd given no sign of it. It was a good thing Vernon seemed to think James incapable of playing games. The grunting men working the oars didn't look at all happy to be a part of this game, since it meant more work for no extra gain, but James too was learning to sacrifice pawns.

Moore met him on the beach, accompanied by a sub-engineer who took charge of the grumpy seamen. "I'm much obliged," said Moore hesitantly as they followed, "but I hope you haven't put another bee in the Admiral's bonnet."

"I may have," James admitted. "But I see no alternative."

"True enough." Moore slapped James's shoulder as they made their way up the beach.

By six o'clock, the last of the supplies were ashore and the seamen were pitching their tents. "They're happier in hammocks with the floor moving all around, I reckon," said Moore from where he and James stood at the edge of the camp. "Will they work? One hundred isn't sixteen hundred, and I know you can't spare them for long. They're worse than useless if they're just going to stand around."

"I'll give them incentive out of my own pocket if I must." James shrugged. "Money means little to me anymore."

Moore raised his eyebrows. "I take it there's no Mrs. Norrington, then?"

"No," said James, dismissing the merits of elaborating.

"That's a shame," said Moore. "Your father loved children, you know—"

"My father is no longer living," snapped James, "and so my childless state can hardly trouble him."

"Forgive me," Moore sighed. "I'm an old man with a big mouth. I just know how young men think. You believe you have all the time in the world. Trust me, when you get to be my age, you'll wish you'd made time for these things—"

"Your advice is noted, Captain Moore," said James shortly. "Now, I believe I shall repair aboard my ship and return at first light."

"Sleep well, lad," said Moore with a sad smile.

In the boat, James drew his coat tighter against the spray and wondered how his unhappiness could be so apparent to others when he was so often unaware of it himself.

In the morning, Vernon made no mention of James's sailors, and received his report without commentary. James had just begun to believe he'd escaped when Vernon beckoned him back.

"Since you're headed to the camp, be a good fellow and deliver this letter to the General, will you? And if he needs clarifying on any points, be so good as to enlighten him."

The camp in the gray morning light was desolate. With their detour to Port Louis, the English had failed to beat the rainy season to Cartagena, and from the moment they'd landed on Tierra Bomba two days ago, the Army had begun to fall to the fever. Sick men lay everywhere, many of them without shelter, and enemy fire from Boca Chica Castle was taking its toll as well. James walked past a hut that looked newly shattered, and smelled blood.

He stayed while Wentworth read the letter. The pale face twitched and grew paler as the General's eyes made their way down the page. When they reached the bottom, Wentworth looked up, his lips white and shaking. "It's my Negro workmen!" he said. "They won't work under fire. Don't you see? The Admiral must land more men!"

James listened stonily, then turned to leave.

"Don't go just yet, Captain Norrington!" Wentworth hurried around behind his desk and snatched up a piece of paper. "Have a cup of coffee, would you? I'll just be a minute."

James declined the coffee and sat while Wentworth scribbled violently at his desk. "There," he said, jumping up and thrusting the paper into James's hands. "Take that to your admirals."

After checking on his sailors at the battery site, James returned to the *Princess Caroline*. He tried to remove himself quickly, but Vernon was faster. "Go and tell Wentworth he'll be waiting until the Second Coming for sixteen hundred more men," Vernon snarled. "Well? What are you waiting for?"

James shut his eyes, counted back from ten, and excused himself.

The General had developed a twitch. He leaned back in his chair with his ankle bouncing on his knee, eye twitching, lips pressed into a line.

"You must understand their reasons," pleaded James. "We cannot disembark so many men, especially since we do not know the disposition of the rest of the Spanish fleet. Were Torres to come suddenly to reinforce Lezo, we would be caught utterly unprepared—"

"Isn't that your job?" snapped Wentworth, bouncing his foot more vigorously. "To keep track of things like that? What do you fellows do all day?" He curled his lip. "Or are you happy to leave all the work to us?"

With the point of rational discussion long past, James sighed, "Is there any reply you'd like me to convey to the Admiral?"

Wentworth chewed on his lip. "Tell him if he wants us to work faster, he might help by silencing those batteries across the channel that harass us day and night."

James nodded and withdrew. On the battery site, the trench was lengthening, and the earth thrown up for the parapet was built into a long mound. James found Moore standing atop it with a spyglass.

"The Barradera usually begins firing around now," he said, stepping down when he saw James approach. "Any minute, and we're going to have to duck our heads."

"About that," said James. "The General blames the Negro workers for the delays. He believes they won't work under fire."

"Let me tell you a secret about human beings," said Moore, nodding toward the sweating men in the trench. "No one will risk his life without a good reason. Now, you take a look at those Negroes and tell me what exactly they have to gain by digging that trench. Will they be any freer if we take that Spanish fort?"

James stared at the men. "I—hadn't thought of it that way."

"Aye," said Moore, "and I'm sure the General hasn't either. But he's not like you—he won't listen." Moore shook his head. "Not to me, anyway."

As the afternoon passed, the earthen parapet grew by inches. Soon the guns from the Barradera began their lazy boom across the channel. Moore took cover, and James returned to the flagship, bearing Wentworth's message.

To James's shock, the Admiral listened to it without interrupting. "So he wants that battery silenced, does he?" he said once he'd heard James to the end. He got up and put his head outside the cabin door. "Midshipman! Signal to the Rear-Admiral: we shall convene a council of war in the morning."

It was as good an excuse as any. James hadn't seen any sign of Sparrow since Playa Grande, and he wanted news of the man as much as he wanted an intelligence report. He hung the lantern off the quarter gallery and waited till the hour they'd agreed upon before going ashore.

Their rendezvous spot was well inland. James picked his way through mangrove swamps and over embankments, circumferentor in hand, until he reached a little clearing ringed by yopo trees.

He thought for a moment that he was in the wrong spot. Then a light blazed from behind a tree and Sparrow stepped out, bearing a lantern. With his face awash in yellow light, he looked inhuman, chthonic and terrible, and the glint of gold when he smiled was as sinister and seductive as cursed treasure. For a moment, James felt something he had never felt before: a yearning for something explicitly forbidden. He wanted to do something wrong, *because* it was wrong; he wanted the freedom of amorality.

"I thought maybe you'd lost your way," said Sparrow.

James looked away from the tiny flames dancing in Sparrow's eyes. "I'm not so easily misled. I, for one, happen to be in possession of a working compass." He cleared his throat. "So. You are in one piece, I see. Is all well? Is your cover intact?"

"All is running smoothly on my end. You?"

"As well as can be expected, considering it's an utter disaster." James felt the smallest bit of relief talking to Sparrow. It was freeing, like confessing his sins to the darkness. "Vernon and Wentworth are determined to botch this whole affair. They're more interested in fighting each other than in fighting the Spanish."

"It's always bad news when a tyrant joins forces with an idiot," Sparrow observed. "But what can you do?"

"Nothing." James sighed. "Nothing at all, and it is driving me mad."

Sparrow nodded sympathetically. Then he winced. "By the way, I don't mean to add to your troubles, but remember that Spanish spy, *el paisano*? He's here."

"Good God." James leaned against a tree. "In our camp?"

"He's someone close to Vernon is all I know."

"Blast." James rubbed his eyes. "You must do your best to find out who he is."

"Already on the case, Gov."

Sparrow's expression, livid with shadows, was impossible to read. James had a sudden thought: if Sparrow wanted revenge for the times James had nearly hanged him, now would be the perfect opportunity, now that he had insinuated himself so thoroughly into James's confidence. His veins filled with ice even as the rational part of him recognized that his anxieties were making him paranoid. He knew that Sparrow was not a malicious man. But what a devilish trick it would be—and Sparrow was the king of devilish tricks.

He forced away his queasiness. "We're to attack the Barradera shortly. What can you tell me about the terrain?"

Sparrow was oblivious to James's turmoil. "There's two batteries, as you know. A good mule-path runs from the smaller to the bigger one," he said, "so if I were you, I'd take the small one by surprise and haul around a few guns to cover your approach to the big one, then storm it at your leisure."

James nodded. "I shall pass that along."

Sparrow cocked his head. "What, you'll not be leading the party? What happened to that boundless ambition of yours?"

James pursed his lips. "Vernon has his own uses for me."

"For shame," said Sparrow. "First rule of bein' a pirate, mate—take what you can, an' do your level best to avoid givin' it bloody back."

"Brave words from you." He was speaking his insecurities aloud before he could stop himself.

"Remind me what you hope to get out of this? Other than the promise of prize-money, which once you found far too vague to be worth your time?"

"I've a stake in your survival, at least," Sparrow replied with a shrug. "If you don't pull through, who'll help me in Havana?"

James sighed. "Very well—if you insist, then I shall endeavor to put myself in charge of that landing party." He thought about what he'd just said, about who he was talking to, and laughed aloud. Taking orders from Sparrow now, was he? "I must be mad."

When he looked over again, Sparrow was staring at him, intense and inscrutable. James narrowed his eyes. "What's the matter?"

"Matter?" said Sparrow. "Nothin'." And he didn't say another word.

The noise of the insects in the trees was suddenly loud. Desperate to break the odd tension, James reached into his coat. "I nearly forgot—I can't bear a debt, so I brought something I hope will compensate you for that claret." He handed Sparrow a foggy bottle of rum.

Sparrow accepted it, uncorked it, and swigged. James watched him take several more swigs before he stopped to breathe. "Earthy," he said, smacking his lips in satisfaction. "With strong notes of lye and iron filings, an' a long sooty finish."

"What a peculiar man you are," James murmured.

They looked at each other for a long, heavy moment, each pondering the strangeness of the other. Then Sparrow cleared his throat. "There's, er, another thing. Those four ships inside the boom—if Don Blas sees the castle about to fall, he'll sink 'em to block the channel if he can."

James had been busy shaking off the confusion brought on by Sparrow's long look. "Then we'll have to capture them before he has a chance."

"I may be able to help you there. You might recall I have a knack for stealin' ships."

"At least this time it will be working for me," James smiled.

"Do that again," said Sparrow.

James blinked. "What?"

"Smile. Laugh. Anything. It looks good on you."

Any laughter that had been in James's breast died. "Now is not the time to mock me," he growled.

Sparrow's eyeroll was nearly audible. "When I mock you, you'll know." He sighed, with no levity. "It's been a long week, Gov'nor. Can you blame me for wantin' somethin' pretty to look at?"

James made to reply, but no words emerged. He waited for Sparrow to say something else, to make it into a joke, to end the heavy silence that had fallen, but Sparrow simply stood in his circle of lanternlight with an unreadable look on his face, his eyes reflecting James back at himself. Flustered and unsettled and not even knowing why, James muttered his farewells, and fled back to his ship.

A bestiary of prisoners, deserters and scouts awaited him there. He shut himself in his day cabin to sift through their conflicting accounts until Venus had set and the windows had begun to lighten. Some time after the turn of the morning watch, he fell asleep on his arms.

As the day began, his cabin filled with the thunder of early-morning activity overhead: feet

pounding up ladders, pumps grinding, holystones scraping the planks. James's sleeping mind turned the sound of water sluicing across the deck and gurgling in the scuppers into the music of a spring storm, lobbed in heavy sheets by a gentle *ostro* against a tile roof in Minorca. The boatswain's calls became the shriek of a flute in the tavern below, and the bark of a lieutenant resolved into Beauclerk's melodious laugh.

In his dream, he lay with his face pressed into sun-dried linen, listening to the rise and fall of Beauclerk's merry chatter. A warm, calloused hand chafed his shoulder, slid down his side and cradled his hip. "Trust me, James," said the voice above him, "as someone with slightly more experience in love..."

James lifted his head and smiled as Beauclerk's hand touched his face. The cold metal of a ring brushed his cheekbone. He opened his eyes.

"Still rooting for you," Sparrow said, and kissed him.

"Sir!" The rapping on his cabin door brought James's head up off the desk. "Flag is signaling, sir!"

Mechanically, he rose and changed his shirt, then shaved and washed the ink smudge off his cheek. The dreams were nothing new; he'd been tormented by them as a boy. When their schoolmaster had driven the midshipmen aboard the *Lyme* through Plato's *Symposium*, he had rejoiced to learn that his nighttime visions of beautiful young Lord Aubrey need not signify in themselves; they could be steps along a path to virtue, instructive illusions that would fade with maturity. For the most part, they had. By the time he'd finished dressing, the thrum in his body had dissipated and he was contemplating instead the effects of the morning's first cup of coffee on his sour stomach.

When he arrived on board the *Princess Caroline*, he found Vernon, Ogle, Lestock and Watson already gathered round the long table in the stateroom, a chart of Boca Chica spread out between them. "Ah," said Vernon absently without looking up, "Norrington, good. We need your report on the fortifications."

"I believe I have a workable plan," James said, accepting a cup of coffee from Vernon's steward. "If we were to land just out of sight of the smaller battery on the leeward side of the peninsula—"

"Just give me numbers of guns and men, Norrington, and leave the strategy to us, if you please."

James clenched his teeth. "Fifteen twenty-four-pounders mounted on the Barradera," he said. "Five in the small battery facing the bay on the western side. About a hundred and fifty men between the two."

"Good. We'll land a party of seamen and Marines as soon as the winds permit. Watson, you'll command the boats, and let's say Gillette for the landing party..."

"Sir," said James, rubbing his gritty eyes and shoring himself up, "let me lead the attack."

"What?" The Admiral looked up. "I need you leaning on Moore and Wentworth, not getting your head blown off with the Marines."

James didn't point out that he was just as likely to get his head blown off if he was with Moore. "I know this coast, sir. I have surveyed it many times."

Watson was glaring murderously at James, but Vernon was smirking. "Itching for a bit of glory, Norrington? Tired of mucking around in ditches like your father, eh?"

James said coolly, "I simply desire to see the job done correctly, sir."

The Admiral laughed long and hard. "You're lucky I like you, Norrington. Fine. You'll take Gillette and Watson with you. If you botch it, you'll spend the rest of this expedition to leeward with the transports. Understood?"

"Aye, sir." James glanced at Watson's furious face, then back at Vernon.

"So," said the Admiral, "let's hear this plan..."

19 March, 1741

The setting sun was huge and rippling through the haze, painting the streaming pendant orange with dying light.

"Tonight?" Gillette asked James as they watched the pendant twitch and flap.

James nodded. For two days, winds had been too high to proceed, and now the weather was abating. But by the time the orange in the western sky had faded to purple, a bank of low clouds had rolled in, so that the weak quarter moon rose out of sight and the night fell deep, black and starless.

At midnight, a flotilla of barges and pinnaces gathered in the *Dauntless's* lee, packed with three hundred sailors and two hundred red-coated soldiers. On deck, James stood with Gillette and Watson as Captain Laws climbed aboard with Murray of the Marines. "Remember," said James to the officers, "Captain Gillette's division is in charge of the artillery once we land; he'll see to aiming those five guns. Captain Laws, your division will run ahead to reconnoiter the larger battery so that we may decide our approach. Remember what I said about those reefs," he said to Watson. "The beach between them is very narrow, and you'll not have much light. It goes without saying that you must be absolutely silent. If we alert the great battery, we lose what advantage we had. Understood?"

A round of "aye"s, and then they were climbing into the boats, pushing off silently, and rowing out into the wide empty dark.

The stars were hidden, and James could barely make out the shape of the hills against the sky. It was hard to tell where the channel opened up, since the land on the opposite side of the harbor merged into the masses of Tierra Bomba and Isla Baru. He searched the unbroken profile of the land for the recognizable forms he'd taken his bearings on. Ahead of him, Watson's boat led. Around him, invisible, hundreds of oars cut through the water in soft, rhythmic splashes.

Within fifteen minutes, the land loomed black and featureless, blotting out the sky. No lights shone on shore. As his men rowed on, he searched the space ahead frantically for evidence of that little bay between the reefs, fearful that at any moment, they'd hear the crunch of dozens of boats tearing open on the rocks.

At last, a dull gray stripe gleamed ahead. James pointed it out silently to his coxswain, and they made for it, praying.

Boat after boat struck the sand, the men hauling them up the beach to make room for the rest. It was too quiet and too dark; they were playing a game of blind man's bluff in which they might blunder straight into the enemy.

An earsplitting boom just above his head made James look up in horror. Then there was another boom and a flash of fire not thirty feet above. They had landed, not a hundred yards from the smaller battery as he'd planned, but right underneath it.

James did the only thing that made sense, and hollered: "FORWARD!"

The Marines were still getting into files, but the unruly seamen surged ahead like a living wave. Bless them, James thought, heart pounding with exhilaration as he scrambled up the embankment with them, buoyed on their savage energy. They were pulling themselves up the steep rock and climbing onto each other's shoulders to boost right through the cannon embrasures. As James reached his embrasure, hoisted up by a cheerful seaman who saluted and then followed, he came nose to nose with a startled Spaniard who backed away and tripped over a gun carriage. James slid past the barrel of the big gun and drew his sword, and the Spaniard fled into the night.

It was impossible to tell how many there were in the dark, but there couldn't have been much more than thirty. They disappeared into the woods without a struggle. The seamen were just beginning a quiet cheer when distant guns sounded—the greater Barradera battery had heard the cannons. A shot struck an earthen epaulement not twenty feet from James. "Keep your heads down!" he ordered. "Gillette, can you heave these guns around?"

"Already tried, sir. The epaulement is in the way."

"Very well." James scanned the crowd of seamen, now joined by Marines, for signs of his other officers. "Spike the guns, burn the carriages, platforms, magazines, anything else you can find, and catch up to us."

"Sir!" Captain Laws appeared at his side just as the quarter moon appeared through a gap in the clouds. "We've just come from the great battery. There are easily a hundred men. If we leave the path halfway down the hill and cut wide, we'll stand a much better chance."

"Good, take us in." Another blast sent a shot over their heads. "My seamen and Captain Murray's Marines! Follow Captain Laws!"

The guns were firing grapeshot by the time the Marines and the company of seamen had set off down the path. Three cannon, as far as James could reckon; presumably that was as many as they could aim away from the sea. Nearby, a seaman went down with half his neck shorn away as a handful of grapeshot screamed past, the first to fall. James looked away and pressed on.

They gathered behind a thicket of cedars to shelter from the fire raining down on the path. Nearby, Captain Laws crouched, frowning. James said, "Take us into the brush."

For a quarter of an hour, they stumbled in the dark through buttressed tree roots and dense bracken, slipping in mud and tearing their clothes on the thick shrubs. To think that Sir Francis Drake's expedition to Panama had braved this sort of terrain and worse for weeks. The tropics were no place for men. Ahead, Laws pushed on confidently, pausing whenever the moon came out to take his bearings, then moving on. The only sound was heavy breathing and grunts as the men fought through the undergrowth.

Finally, Laws stopped and held up a hand. They were gathered just behind the tree line, and above them sloped the little escarpment of the Barradera.

"We'll attack in two columns," James whispered, waving over Captain Murray. "Marines against the east side, seamen against the west. Laws, with me."

James and Laws led their divisions west, leaving Murray behind to form his troops. Soon the sound of the Marines' attack reached James where he crouched, and through the brush he could see the file of red coats surging into the battery's east side. A spatter of small arms fire broke out. "*Forward!*" James whispered as loudly as he could, and their rambunctious party of seamen

flooded toward the battery, James and Laws carried along.

The escarpment loomed above, and then he was up it and there was nothing but bangs and shouts and bayonets in his face as he hacked with his sword, pushing and thrusting, his body defending itself without much help from his mind. Soon Spaniards were pouring out into the countryside, and at last, the gunfire went silent and the only enemies left lay wounded or dead on the ground.

James lowered his sword with a sigh while the men cheered. "Captain Laws, spike these guns and burn everything that will burn."

Once all the lieutenants had reported in and he was satisfied the area was secured, James headed back down the mule-path to the smaller battery to find Gillette, who hadn't joined in time for the attack. A hundred paces up the path, a British seaman was rolling over a dead Spaniard who'd been lying on a sheet of dark cloth. When the seaman had dislodged it from the Spaniard's body, James saw it was a British ensign.

"Sir," said the man, bringing the ensign to him, "look what that Spanish bastard bled all over."

James took the ensign and stretched it out. Part of it was heavier than the rest; when he shook it, something rustled in the corner. The man watched incredulously as James ripped open the lining and drew out a bundle of papers.

"Well done, seaman," said James, leafing through the Spanish letters. "I do believe you've just become an intelligence agent."

Three hours later, James beside an ink-stained clerk, translating the last of the letters. Across from him, Vernon listened, eyes focused on his fingers where the lay on the table.

"So," said Vernon when the clerk had put down his quill, "that coward Torres has shut himself up in Havana for good." He tapped his fingers. "Do not breathe a word of this to Wentworth. Otherwise he'll start clamoring again for us to land more troops."

James gaped. "Sir, if we can aid him, we must! Torres is no longer a threat—we have no more reason to withhold those troops."

"You too, now?" Vernon narrowed his eyes. "We are running out of time—we do not have the luxury of his dithering—"

"Sir," said James, collecting himself, "I could not agree more, but browbeating the General is not going to change his mind. This stubborn refusal to help him will simply prolong—"

"Enough!" Vernon slapped the table. "You listen to me—I've given you more leeway in the last two years than I should've. I even let you make a fool of me with those seamen you lent Moore. I'm starting to think it was a mistake, putting so much faith in you, so if you question me again on this expedition, you'll spend the rest of this war on the beach. Understand?"

"Aye, sir," said James softly.

And he did. It was the rank and not the man he owed obedience to. For all he knew, his friends were struggling with their loyalties too, suffering in isolation, afraid to confide their doubts. But none of them would ever know.

"You've struck the Dons a mighty blow!" Vernon stood at the quarterdeck rail in full Parliamentary mode, arms out to embrace his adoring public. James noted with disgust that the men did, indeed,

adore him. "So exemplary was your conduct," he bellowed on, "that you shall have a dollar each for your gallantry. What say you to that?"

A tremendous roar went up on deck. James shut his eyes and prayed for patience.

The Admiral's magnanimous smile vanished as soon as the men were dismissed. "Get over here, Norrington," he said, walking up to the poop deck. "Go ashore and get hold of Moore. We gave him his respite from enemy fire, and yet Wentworth says they're not even working on the damn battery today."

"They're throwing up an epaulement, sir," said James. At Vernon's blank look, he added, "We took care of the Barradera, but they need a side work to protect them from the ships inside the channel." Vernon's look grew darker, so he talked on. "Men cannot work quickly under fire, sir—"

"I went to a lot of trouble to silence that battery!" Vernon growled. "The least they can do is answer it with a bit of progress!"

James didn't point out whose trouble had been responsible for the victory on the Barradera. "I'll go ashore," he sighed.

Moore was too busy to spare much attention. The bombardment from the ships had begun again, and everyone was intent on keeping their heads down. The parapet had been raised as far as the embrasures, and men were pounding the revetments into place. The gun platforms were nearly complete. Despite the bombardment, the men were almost cheerful, and Moore was as focused as James had ever seen him. There was little reason to stay.

Late in the afternoon, James stepped into Wentworth's command headquarters to find the three Navy commanders and all the principle land officers, including Moore, who caught his eye immediately. Something like reproach passed between them, and then Vernon said, "Nice of you to show up, Norrington. Now, shall we begin?"

"I'd like to say first," blurted Wentworth in a high, anxious voice, "that we are doing all we can, and such gestures are entirely—"

"This document," said Vernon, "outlines our official complaint, and our official request that the Army carry its attack on Boca Chica Castle immediately, without any further excuses. All of you may witness its signing." Vernon bent and signed the page in his bulbous script, then handed the pen to Ogle.

James glanced at Moore again, who was rubbing his temples. He didn't bother looking at the General and the Brigadiers, who were all stiff with humiliation. Then Lestock handed him the pen. He tried to convey an apology in his last look at Moore before bending to sign the page himself.

In which endings collide violently with beginnings

Chapter Notes

Explicit content in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Personally, I think the Admiral has every right to be angry," said Beauclerk, taking a bite of his sea pie. "The General's delays have been nothing short of criminal."

"Wentworth's an idiot," James agreed, "you'll hear no argument from me. But the Army is doing its best to raise that battery as quickly as they can—"

"They don't even need a battery!" cried Beauclerk, stabbing a bit of meat. "Just a few ladders and some courage, and they'd have taken the thing days ago."

James dropped his fork. "But to withhold our support, like a chastening parent, even though we have no hope of changing the General's mind? What good can it do?"

"If Vernon and Ogle humor the General, then the madness will only continue." Beauclerk pushed back his plate. "A few days will turn into weeks, and the next thing we know, it'll be '26 all over again and we'll all be dead from the fever."

"Honestly, Aubrey!" James tossed down his napkin. "We have a choice between days or months, and the Admirals are willfully choosing months!"

"Balderdash."

They glared at each other over their plates, and then Beauclerk sat back with a sigh. "Norry, you're right: there's no subject more tiresome than war, especially if it makes us argue. Pax?"

James smiled wearily. "Pax."

They sat in silence. Then, all at once, they began to laugh.

"I'm afraid there's not much else to talk about," Beauclerk chuckled, face flushed. "So why don't you tell me the whole Barradera action from beginning to end."

"Very well." James wiped his eyes. "I'll try not to be too tiresome..."

They talked well after their dinner was finished, and James relaxed in the pleasure of friendly company, but part of him had gone cold. Beauclerk would always be his friend—but he could not be a confidant. Nor could Moore, who politics kept him from being frank with. There was no one, except maybe Sparrow, who didn't count—not really.

The battery began firing on the castle the next day. James met Moore in the camp.

"What's next?" James asked as they strolled between the tents.

Moore sighed. "Now the General's on about clearing a road through the woods for a surprise

attack." His eyes went wide. "Don't tell Vernon. Or if you do, don't tell him you heard it from me."

"You have my word." James looked down. "What do you think—shall the General finally attack the fort, once his battery makes a breach?"

"I see no reason why not. He's a brave enough fellow—as long as it's all done by the book."

They stood together a while longer, listening to the guns, contemplating bravery. Then James left Moore to discharge his newest asinine orders, and made his way back to his ship.

23 March, 1741

James stood at the rail with his officers, dizzy from the heat in full dress, straining to catch a tendril from the teasing breeze that occasionally wove its way down on deck. The Marines behind him held their muskets stiffly, silently sweating into their shirts. Half a mile to windward, five ships sailed down the coast in a line of battle.

"Present—arms!" brayed the Marine captain, and a hundred muskets rattled in the hands of their sweating soldiers. At the head of the line, the *Boyne* flew Lestock's broad commodore's pendant, and as soon as she was near enough, three cheers went up.

"Huzzah!"

James took out his handkerchief and mopped his face.

"Huzzah!"

He fought the urge to check his watch.

"Huzzah!"

The hot air rang with the silence. Behind the *Boyne* sailed that pretty new ship out of Deptford, with its apple-cheeked figurehead. James wondered what Beauclerk was thinking right now. Surely he knew just as well as everyone else that the shallow water inside the channel made this a fool's errand, that a ship bombarding a fort was helpless unless it could get within musket shot. But James had never known Beauclerk to question an order. Perhaps his loyalty was greater than James's, or perhaps he was braver. One thing was certain: James wished he were in that line right now, no matter how stupid the orders, because he hated nothing so much as watching a friend sail into battle without him.

The breeze brought the sound of singing. Within moments, the men on deck had taken it up.

"Britons, strike home!"

"Revenge, revenge your country's wrongs..."

The other ships in Lestock's deviousness were passing the *Dauntless's* beam now: *Princess Amelia*, *Suffolk*, then *Tilbury*. Their sailors were waving their hats, their officers returning salutes from their quarterdecks, flush with patriotic pleasure.

"Fight! Fight and record

Fight! Fight and record yourselves in Druids' Songs..."

James had loved this song once, but now the words sounded silly to him. As a boy, he'd wanted to

be recorded in song, but as a man he'd settled for the good opinion of his superiors and a comfortable living. The dream had died with Sparrow, as a matter of fact—Sparrow and Elizabeth, who'd convinced him he wasn't destined for song but for institutional approval, like those medallions he shared with Vernon. Now with his heart so set against his commanding officer, James didn't feel worthy even of that. England reserved its Druids' songs for men like Beauclerk, who threw themselves blindly into the fray no matter who led the charge.

All afternoon, James and his officers stood on the quarterdeck with their spyglasses, watching Lestock's little division move into position.

"What's he doing?" muttered Forrest, glass trained on the *Boyne*. "Why, he's slipped too far to leeward. He's drawing crossfire."

As the dusk deepened, the *Boyne* continued to hold, but as the second dog watch began, she suddenly slipped her cable and fell off. James came up on deck just in time to see her set her topsails and crawl back out toward the squadron.

Forrest stood grimly at the rail, and together they watched the muzzle flashes like sparks on the water in the settling dark. With the *Boyne* gone, the two nearest ships, *Hampton Court* and *Prince Frederick*, now absorbed the crossfire.

"The Admiral gave no orders to fall off," Forrest observed, and James nodded, but neither of them said a word more.

James tried to make out through his glass how things fared aboard the *Prince Frederick*, but there wasn't enough light. With each blast from the guns, he tried to make out how many of her spars had been knocked away, but all he could see was a cloud of smoke with flashes of light at the center. Still the ship lay where she was, firing without cease on the castle, too far out in the channel to do a lick of good.

This wasn't the first time in history that a man had waited anxiously for a friend to return from battle. Nothing he suffered was unique, he told himself, and this comforted him. Tomorrow, the sun would rise on an unchanged world, with him most likely still in it, and Beauclerk, who was perfectly able to take care of himself. He rubbed his eyes and went below, where he puzzled over another chess move and listened to the guns that shook the air around him.

In his bunk, he lay with eyes wide open and fixed on the gently turning tell-tale compass. Beauclerk was a sensible man. When they'd been youngsters, it had always been James who was in trouble for taking unnecessary risks, for acting without thinking, for chasing personal glory against better judgment. Beauclerk was heroic, but never stupid. James got up and paced round his cabin, then sat and took out the purser's accounts, letting his eyes wander over the meaningless marks.

Around three in the morning, he dozed off. It seemed like only minutes had passed before Lieutenant Forrest was shaking his arm.

"Sir? Sir, we have a report."

He wiped the saliva discreetly off his cheek. "What is it?"

"*Prince Frederick* has been ordered off. But—" Forrest cleared his throat. "Lord Aubrey has been wounded, sir." He bit his lip. "Mortally, it appears."

James's ears roared. "I see," he said, barely aware that he was speaking. "Prepare my barge, if you would, Mr. Forrest."

Forrest gave him a long look. "Aye, aye, sir."

It was bedlam aboard the *Prince Frederick*. The decks were still bloody and the stench below was unbelievable. The frantic shouts and the pounding of the carpenter's hammers echoed all over the ship as men struggled against the water still pouring through the shot-riddled hull. With that noise mingled the cries of the wounded, which could be heard all the way aft.

Beauclerk's cabin was quiet and empty except for the surgeon's mate who sat beside his captain's bunk.

"The surgeon's in the cockpit seeing to the others," said the young man, springing guiltily to his feet. "He said there weren't much more we could do for the Captain."

James made himself look down at his comatose friend, and immediately shut his eyes. He opened them to pebbly vagueness, his throat hot and closed; he clung to his dignity and swallowed. Beauclerk's left leg was gone at the hip, and there was a deep black bruise covering his temple. The *Dauntless's* surgeon was already bending over him, lifting his eyelids, taking his pulse. James wanted to smack his hands aside, but he was too busy praying the man would give him a shred of hope.

"It don't look good, sir," said the surgeon softly, not meeting his eyes. "Pulse is weak. Bleeding in his skull, too, from the looks of it."

James nodded. He couldn't remember how to do anything else. "Thank you, Doctor. You and—"

"Smollett, sir."

"You and Mr. Smollett, leave me alone with the Captain, if you please."

The two men left without a word.

James sat on the stool Smollett had occupied. Beauclerk's bunk swung gently with the rolling of the ship, and James stared at a powder-blackened hand that hung over the side. He reached for it, hesitated, then took it, remembering that no one was around. Beauclerk stirred and tossed his head, moaning. "Aubrey?" He squeezed the hand. "Are you awake?" But Beauclerk didn't move again.

Hours passed, and it was far into the forenoon watch when there was a hesitant knock on the door. James opened it to find one of Beauclerk's midshipmen, who looked miserable. "Lieutenant Forrest's compliments, sir," he said, "but I'm to tell you he needs you back. He sends his regrets but he says Admiral Vernon is signaling for you to come ashore."

James looked over at Beauclerk, who hadn't even sighed in hours. It was as though a length of tarred line bound him there; he couldn't step away without causing an unbearable tugging pain in his breast. He turned back to the boy. "Find my surgeon," he said. "The Captain is not to be left alone, is that understood?"

"Aye, sir." The boy's eyes were full of tears.

James gazed down at Beauclerk, insides twisting into knots, before shutting his eyes and turning toward the door, as blind as when he'd rowed into empty darkness.

"What's this all about?" James asked Forrest as he climbed down to the barge.

"The Admiral wants you acquainted with the new chief engineer," said Forrest, not looking at him.

"New engin—" James blinked. "What?"

"Captain Moore was killed on the battery early this morning," said Forrest softly. "A fellow named Armstrong is in charge now. The Admiral wants you to—make it clear who's in charge."

James dropped his head into his hands. Forrest turned to him, alarmed, but didn't say anything, and eventually James collected himself. "As before," he said, "we shall do our duty."

He leapt into the water as soon as the boat's keel brushed the bottom, eager to get this over with. The longer he spent here, the longer he was away from Beauclerk.

"Mr. Armstrong," he said, meeting the man on the battery. "I've been asked to make your acquaintance."

Armstrong was older than Moore, but less confident. "I've nothing to report," he said warily, "except we expect to make a breach in the castle any minute, and once that's done, it's up to the General when we'll storm it."

"I understand. Has he abandoned this plan of a road?"

"I believe so, sir."

"Good. Now, if you'll excuse me—"

"Can I confess something to you, Captain Norrington?" Armstrong touched his shoulder, and James nodded. "In confidence?" Raising an eyebrow, James nodded again. "I've served in the Royal Corps of Engineers for sixteen years, but I've never been in battle. Only two of the sub-engineers have. With Captain Moore gone, we've precious little experience under fire."

"First of all," said James, "you are not to bring this fact to anyone else's attention. Is that clear?"

The man nodded.

"It's for your own good, trust me. Second of all, working under fire merely requires courage. Do you possess courage, Captain Armstrong?"

"I can if I must, sir."

"Well, then, you shouldn't have a problem. Carry on."

It wasn't Shakespeare, but it was as inspirational as he was capable of being at the moment, and he had no patience for cowardice.

He spent the afternoon helping Vernon draft a letter to Wentworth urging him to attack the castle. James wasn't sure what could possibly be said that hadn't been said already, and it was growing obvious that abuse got them nowhere with the good General, but James was frantic to be done so he could return to his friend. Finally he left with orders to return in the morning for a council of war.

The surgeon met him on deck of the *Prince Frederick*. One look at his face, and James didn't need to be told.

"May I see him?" he asked the surgeon.

"If you like, sir, except—" The surgeon bit his lip. "We had orders not to bury him at sea, but to convey his body home so he could be buried with his family in Hanworth."

James paled in horror. "And how, precisely, are you planning to do that?"

"Er, you see"—the surgeon looked around—"we've put him in a barrel of brandy." He swallowed. "Mixed with tincture of myrrh and camphor."

James couldn't stop a vision of Beauclerk's dead face, pickled and white, rippling through mirrored amber. He clutched his mouth and spun away, breathing hard through his nose. Eyes spilling with grief and nausea, he took his hand from his mouth and gasped, holding his stomach, leaning heavily on the rail, before wiping his eyes and straightening.

"Never mind," he said to the man, who had wandered off to give him his privacy. "Did you read over him?"

"Of course, sir." The surgeon gave a tight smile. "He was much loved."

James had hoped to hear the prayers, at least. He shut his eyes against the sting. "Very well. Thank you." He stumbled back to his boat.

The news had spread through the fleet, and the deck of the *Dauntless* was silent when he came back on board. James looked at the sober faces tight with pity, and for one serene moment, he was comforted, until he remembered that none of those faces could be the one he wanted, and he hated them. Breathless, he passed his officers and flew to his day cabin, where he hoped that any emotional discharge could at least occur in private.

Nothing happened. He stood in the center of his cabin, ears ringing, feeling nothing. Somewhere between the main deck and this cabin, everything had rushed out of him like a flux and left him a dry, aching shell. Was that better? He sat down at his desk. It wasn't better; it looked at first like relief, but he could feel the beginnings of madness in it, the pulling away from the shores of his senses into empty black.

A splash of red startled him—his shirt cuff and the heel of his hand were bloody, and he lifted his hand and stared, wondering where on that slaughterhouse of a ship he'd laid it down. Past his hand, he saw the lantern on the desk, dark and inert now, waiting for his will to bring it to life.

Fumbling the flint and nearly spilling the oil, James lit it, and stumbled out onto the quarter gallery to hang it up.

Jack had spent the majority of the last week in disguise, but a disguise was of very little use when you were trapped inside a fort under heavy bombardment. Don Sebastián had ordered deserters shot, and regardless of his disguise's other virtues, it was not exactly inconspicuous.

For three hours, Jack crouched in the flank of a bastion, his teeth rattling with each shot that smashed into the outer curtain. Some were coming from a ship, judging by direction, but most were coming from the English battery. He had a joyless laugh over the possibility that the ship might be Norrington's, and crouched as low as he could behind the strongest part of the wall. Nothing was worth this, not all the gold in the world—and especially not Norrington.

His only warning was a whistle close by, and then everything exploded in a funnel of shattered stone. When he could move again, he was thirty feet from where he'd started, draped over a crumbling tower of broken wall. There was something sticky on his forehead.

"Man the breach!" a voice shouted, and dozens of feet crunched past in the gravel. Gasping with pain, Jack dragged himself up from his sore heap, cursing as the stones bruised his hands and knees. Someone stopped to help him up before running on, and he limped slowly to the end of the curtain wall and looked around the corner.

Men were hauling the larger broken stones back into the breached flank, and workmen were driving pickets and passing out shovels to dig a coupure. The rest of the men were helping to haul around the great guns that had been unseated by the blast. No one was looking at Jack.

As he got his breath against the wall, he tested his body, and nothing screamed at him with the anguish of a major injury. Then again, a mortally wounded man could walk around for hours before dropping dead. His ankle was swollen, but it would bear weight. Carefully he crept out onto the now-empty parade, where any man who happened to turn around might see him.

For the first ten paces, it went miraculously well. He'd nearly got back to believing in his freakish good luck when he spotted two soldiers starting across the yard. All that was nearby was the powder magazine, and he darted for its covered entrance. The soldiers were coming closer now, and Jack stumbled back, panicking. His heel caught a stone, and he tumbled backward through the door.

It was dark and cool inside the magazine, built to withstand enemy fire. The whole place smelled acrid and mineral, and Jack coughed, sending up little grey clouds. It was hard to breathe. Between his sword, pistol, and other miscellaneous bits of metal on him, he had no business being there. Brushing himself off, he poked his head back out the door to be sure the coast was clear, then made a hobbling dash for the gate.

At last, he reached the edge of the woods and climbed to his lookout. With his glass, he scanned the anchored squadron. Sure enough, a lantern hung from the *Dauntless's* quarter gallery. Norrington wanted something from him again—something unreasonable, with nothing in it for him, and immediately, if you please. That was it. He was finished with the English, and spying, and Norrington, and he'd get his bloody ship back without anybody's help like he should have done from the start. He had scorch marks on his arse, and he'd go off like a rocket if somebody lit a pipe two miles away. Enough was enough. Norrington wouldn't even get a chance to speak.

As night fell, he drew back into the trees and hobbled inland. At the top of the wooded hill just north of the deserted Chamba battery, in the little ring of yopo trees, he made out a slender figure and hurried on, angry words crowding his breast. "Norrington—" He staggered to the top of the hill. "I've had enough, savvy? I'm—"

His voice died. Norrington looked a dozen years older, his eyes ringed with purple, his skin the color of his shirt. He stared at Jack with bewildered misery. "Sparrow...good heavens, are you well? Your head—good God, you smell positively flammable—"

"'S nothin', mate," he shrugged with a weak smile. His complaints fought to get out but they seemed to lodge in his throat.

"I've done a terrible thing," said Norrington hoarsely, "keeping you here. Go, before things get worse—I've no right—"

"I'll do as I like, thanks," Jack said gently. What was he saying? Norrington was giving him a way out; why wasn't he taking it? "You, er...you look awful, Gov'nor."

"My friend is dead." Norrington was too shattered to do anything but hand Jack the words.

Jack bowed his head. "Sorry to hear it."

"If only that damned Lestock hadn't fallen so far to leeward! It's his fault, the coward." Norrington dropped his head into his hand. "You must get out of here, Sparrow, I can't be responsible for you anymore. Not with these—these madmen in charge."

"Now, look," said Jack, "Captain Jack Sparrow never goes where he's told unless he was already headed there to begin with."

Norrington's laugh was shrill, and his sudden smile was ghastly beyond measure. "You have no idea how glad I am for that."

Before Jack quite knew what was happening, they had stumbled into a tangle of arms that stopped short of an embrace. It was like coming face to face with a jungle cat. Trapped by Norrington's big, clutching hands, the scent of his skin suddenly close, Jack shuddered under a bolt of undifferentiated feeling, and when it receded and Norrington's wide, glassy eyes were all he could see, he could think of nothing but rightness, inevitability, yes, yes, yes. He shifted carefully, lest he startle this shy creature, and brought their bodies closer.

"Christ." Norrington jerked back, but Jack held on. Norrington tugged futilely. "I'm—this is—I'm not in my right mind—surely you—"

Jack couldn't figure out why Norrington wanted to stop this. Then he remembered the blue-eyed man. "Seemed like a rum chap, your friend," he heard himself say.

Norrington gazed at him in dumb confusion, then tried again to pull away again. It was a weak effort.

"I could help," said Jack. He was capable of saying a great many things to get someone into bed, but this was new territory for him; this resembled sincerity.

"What?" More shrill horror. "I—Christ, no, *no*. I—" He was looking everywhere but at Jack.

"There's no shame in it."

Norrington went still, as though he'd decided something. His eyes swam with grief. "Have you ever had a feeling as though you've forgotten something?" He gagged on the last word, like it was too big to get out. "As though you're a moment too late, and just on the verge of realizing it?"

Jack ran his knuckles down Norrington's cheek, felt Norrington's startled exhale on his hand. Was this cruelty or mercy? He was used to taking what he wanted, but Norrington's funny rules had rubbed off on him. The man was shivering like he was freezing, and Jack couldn't look away, transfixed by his own power. He opened his mouth—there was a moment when they breathed each other's breath—and then they were kissing. Quickly he reached up to hold Norrington's head in place to keep him from flinching away.

The kiss ended and Norrington gave a hiccupping gasp like a sob. This was more than taking what he wanted, this was taking advantage—but Jack wanted, and he was tired of denying himself. He cupped Norrington's face and kissed his open mouth without waiting to be kissed back. Awe stole over him; he was the only person who had ever seen this. As rare and secret as the sight of a mermaid: Commodore Norrington falling apart in his arms.

"Captain! Sir, are you here?"

Norrington jerked back like he'd been shot, eyes wild. "Get out of here!" he mouthed, and Jack

nodded. But before they could separate completely, Jack seized his wrist. "I'll find you," he whispered, and they stood temple to temple, cheeks brushing, wrapped together in something huge and dark. Jack kissed an ear, darting his tongue out to trace it, and then ran, away from the approaching voices. After a hundred paces, he heard Norrington's faint voice say, "Over here, Mr. Forrest. I'm afraid I got turned round in the dark..."

He ran on, heart pounding. What a mighty fool he was. He needed to leave this place and never return—but he already knew he would not.

24 March, 1741

James sat listening, his face cloudless and serene.

"The General is finally getting down to business," Vernon was saying, "but as usual, he's asked for our help. A landing of men on Isla Baru near the Barradera, as a distraction—unnecessary, of course, but we'll show him we can be obliging when he starts talking sense..."

James felt as though he were floating in a chilly bath, his skin numb, his limbs weightless, his ears full of roaring nothingness.

"...since you were so successful the last time and you know the terrain, Norrington, I'm giving it to you. Maybe that'll snap you out of this melancholia."

James looked up, blinking.

"Are you sure that's wise?" asked Lestock, glancing at Ogle. James sat up straighter. He suddenly had the sense of being regarded as an invalid or a lunatic.

"Perhaps Captain Norrington should remain on Tierra Bomba to deal with the engineers," Lestock went on, with another beady look at James.

"We're finished with the engineers," said Vernon cheerfully. "At least until we move against the inner harbor. And we can thank heaven that that idiot Moore isn't in charge anymore. With our luck, Armstrong is an even bigger idiot, but at least we're free of Moore's hemming and hawing—"

All heads turned toward the screech of chair legs as James stood up. "You must excuse me, Admiral," he said, voice shaking. He fled the cabin before anyone could react.

Ten minutes later on deck, Ogle came up beside him. They watched the gulls hover and dip for a while before Ogle said, "Everyone knows he was a friend of your father's, which is why you were excused. But you're on thin ice, Norrington."

James let out a breath. "I understand, sir."

"I dare say I know you well by now," Ogle went on. "I know you're a man of strong convictions, who through all shocks and opposition always believes in his own righteousness." He paused. "This is precisely what makes you dangerous. I have a fleet to look after, and I cannot afford a dangerous man in its midst. Pull yourself together and get back in line. I shan't make excuses for you anymore."

James nodded. "Aye, aye, sir."

Ogle squeezed his shoulder. "It's a damn shame about Lord Aubrey." Then he was gone.

Late in the afternoon the next day, a multitude of boats crowded around the side of the *Dauntless*.

"We are intended to be a distraction," said James to Watson, Cotes and Forrest, who were leaning over the gunwales of their barges. "That means there is no reason for any loss of life. Stay visible, or the ruse shan't work, but no heroics unless I say otherwise."

It was late afternoon, hot, hazy and still. The smoke from the city, garrison and two fleets lay like a chalky film over everything in sight. From the boats rowing toward Isla Baru half a mile out, the Barradera was a rippling grey smudge on the water, until white puffs announced three shots off their bows, too far ahead to hit them but close enough to startle.

"It seems we've diverted their attention," said James.

They landed five hundred yards to leeward. Carrying the boats with them, they crept up the coast along the beach in full view of all the forts around the channel. Periodically, the guns from the Barradera spoke.

"How many would you say are remounted?" James asked Forrest. "Six?"

"Aye." Forrest marched with his head down, mopping his dark upper lip. He had the sort of Scottish coloring that kept his razor from ever shaving close enough. "From the intervals between guns, it can't be more than that."

"This ought to go smoothly, then." James hid his nerves. The real fighting and dying would happen across the channel on Tierra Bomba, where Brigadier Blakeny was preparing his companies for an assault on the castle an hour before sundown. They still had twenty minutes to go. If James was too quick in his success, he might not divert the enemy long enough. "Slow your march," he called ahead to Cotes and Watson.

Out in the channel, the Spanish ships were silent, unable to risk firing on their own battery. Don Blas's flag flew at the mainmast of the *Galicia*; he was onboard and not in the fort. Interesting. So Blakeny would not capture Don Blas, but if he moved quickly enough, James might. The thought excited and unnerved him. How glorious it would be—and yet how glorious could it be if his captive was ten times the man his own commander was?

Ahead, Watson stopped and crouched, making the signal for the men to set down the boats. James crept up and took his place, and then the whole party melted into the brush, all two hundred men pushing their way through the undergrowth until the rear of the battery came into view. Then James gave the signal, and the men rushed forward with cries and cheers, pistols and cutlasses out, all their eager energy pouring into the garrison's arms.

A great deal of shouting, one or two shots, and then it was over. Thirty surly Spaniards were disarmed and herded together while seamen spiked the remounted guns and set fire to the hastily built new platforms. Soon the battery was smoking, going off with cheerful blasts when the flames found a cask of powder, while James's party secured the prisoners a few yards down the path.

Across the channel came three mortar blasts—the signal for the attack. James took out his spyglass just in time to see the first round of grapeshot from the English battery pour into the castle's breach. A still followed in which the echo of the blasts rolled across the water, and then through the smoke he could make out the first party of soldiers climbing through the breach. The so-called forlorn hope, all volunteers ready and willing to die. After a few minutes, James made out Lieutenant-Colonel Macleod and his party of grenadiers. The smoke was mostly gone, but the small arms fire had begun, though nothing was stemming the flow of British soldiers. The companies under Daniels and Cochrane were now in view, and the Spaniards manning the breach had fallen back.

"Captain Watson, secure these prisoners," said James, putting away his glass. "Captain Cotes, Mr. Forrest, we shall return to the boats—now is our chance to take Fort San Josef."

James did not mention that he intended to make a target of them as one hundred fifty men pulled in boats toward the island fort. But that was their task. It was gloomy dusk when they dragged the boats up on the rocky beach below the fort walls. But inside, they found it abandoned, apart from one drunk Spaniard dozing by the guard house.

"Captain Norrington!" called a seaman. "Look!"

James ran out onto the parapet and followed where the seaman was pointing to a fire that had blazed up just inside the channel. It was the *San Felipe*. His heart leapt into his throat as he saw that the masts of the *Africa* and *San Carlos* too were listing heavily to one side.

"Everyone to the boats!" James shouted. "Now!" Don Blas was sinking his ships in the channel, just as Sparrow said he would.

They left Cotes at the fort and threaded the boats carefully through the shoals and past the boom. Only the *Galicia* was still upright. James could see boats on the opposite shore, full of Spaniards fleeing their scuttled ships, and wondered if Don Blas was among them.

Ahead, the dark mass of the *Galicia* loomed. The wind had picked up and backed round to the north so that her stern swung wide, opening her mighty broadside. If anyone was left aboard her, they could blow James and his men from the water.

There was a bone-rattling explosion on the lee shore as the *San Felipe's* powder magazine went up in a geyser of smoke and timber. Flaming, blackened bits of her rained down on the water amid the swirling smoke. All of the men stared for a moment, jaws slack, before pulling on their oars with redoubled effort toward the *Galicia*, who at any moment might slip her plug and sink as well.

Where was everyone? Perhaps the Spaniards had set a long charge that would send the *Galicia* up like the *San Felipe* once James's men were aboard. He needed more information, but that was impossible in the dark. The Admiral's flag slapped against the mast in the light land breeze. Don Blas might still be aboard. "Harder!" he cried. "Pull harder!"

The boats drew closer to the ship, and still the gun ports stayed shut, the deck stayed empty, and James's dread grew. In his mind, he saw the long fuse in the depths of the ship. "Stop!" he shouted all at once, and the men held water with their oars. For a moment, all was silent except for the roaring of the fire behind them.

A flame leapt up on the deck of the *Galicia*. "Back!" shouted James. "Get clear of her!"

"Avast, Commodore!" came a voice, and James saw now that the flame was a torch in the hand of a peculiar black-clad figure. It wove its way to the rail. "Approach, and behold! I've brought you a present!"

James stared, and under his breath, he whispered, "Sparrow?"

The figure laughed as though he'd heard. The robes were a cassock—Dominican, if James wasn't mistaken. "*Dominus vobiscum!*" the mad priest shouted. "*A felix natalis* to you, Commodore! I'd have tied 'er up with a bow if there'd been one about! *Vale!*" Arms wheeling, the figure sprang off the rail and struck the water with the splashless gulp of a sinking stone, while the torch went out with a hiss.

James waited for the sound of Sparrow surfacing, but there was no time. The boats hooked on to

the *Galicia*'s side, and it was time to worry about surviving again. They climbed aboard with lines and grapnels, and James made straight for the great cabin, sensitized to any movement from the darkened quarters of the ship, sniffing the air for burning powder, listening for any activity. Forrest's steady, competent presence at his side reassured him.

As they made their way down the companionway, they heard a strange sound: a rhythmic pounding. When they reached the door to the great cabin, they discovered what it was. The door was barricaded from the outside with what looked like every spare object in the ship—empty barrels, oars, boat hooks, studdingsail booms, rammers and sponges and handspikes. "Clear this away," James ordered, and smiled a little at the frantic pounding coming from inside the cabin. When the door finally opened, they found a party of Spaniards who instantly lifted their hands. Among them, James recognized the young captain who had cut Don Blas's meat aboard the *Sheerness* two years ago.

"¿Dónde está el Almirante?" barked James.

The captain thrust out his sword on the flats of his hands. "It is just us, *Capitán*," he said. "*Por favor*, may we just get this over with?"

James shook his head. "Now I have *two* of Don Blas's flag-captains. I hope for your sake he values you more than the last one."

The rest of the night went in a sluggish blur, as the thrill of battle evaporated to expose minutes that were much like hours. They moored the *Galicia* and secured the prisoners in her hold, and suddenly it was the end of the first watch. James wandered between his duties with an automatic step, hearing reports from lieutenants, issuing orders, and making decisions he forgot soon after. At last, Forrest suggested discreetly that he rest.

On shore, parties of escaping Spaniards were fleeing toward the city. The English jubilation at the fort was muted by exhaustion, but on the ships, it was raucous. Aboard the *Dauntless*, James shouted for the hands to get ahold of themselves, and made for his cabin with orders not to be disturbed for anything less than an emergency. He'd barely slept two hours since hearing of Beauclerk, and in his exhaustion, the vertiginous joy of victory was colliding violently with his grief. He felt close to madness.

In his cabin, he spotted the chess board under the window. The pieces were just as he and Forrest had left them, which meant that Beauclerk had been alive the last time they'd moved.

His hand twitched, and then he swept the pieces onto the deck. Off the board, they were just dumb matter, bodies without spirits. James knelt and pushed at one with his finger. Beauclerk was still dead, and James's poor soul didn't know what to make of it. He couldn't mourn, he couldn't weep, he couldn't feel. The wind of his feelings blew across the tide. He tried putting his hand to his mouth and moaning, then squeezed his eyes shut. The chaos of the battle returned and he saw Jack Sparrow leaping from the deck of the *Galicia* like an underworld spirit. Sparrow, oh, Sparrow. His stomach clenched with pleasure, and then the seas crossed inside him and he moaned again, digging his fingers into his cheeks. "Help me," he said in a voice too soft for what he meant. "Help me," he said again, but he couldn't make himself louder. "*Help me*," he breathed, willing the words to come out in a shout, but they would not.

Joints creaking, he picked himself up and staggered to a side cabinet where he kept the brandy, but when he looked at the inch of amber liquid in his glass, his stomach heaved. He poured it carefully back into the bottle. He longed to throw the thing against the bulkhead, to shred his hands on the broken glass, to bleed and cry—but he didn't know how to do those things. All he knew how to do

was pickle in his grief, like Beauclerk in his barrel. Sparrow might help him—but the thought of Sparrow was too hot to touch, too bright to look at, and finally James wound up in a corner with his forehead on his knees, seeing nothing, thinking nothing, willing away the world.

Sometime after midnight, his body got up of its own accord and undressed itself. Without the support of a stiff uniform, he sagged, and crawled into his bunk empty of spirit and strength.

He woke a little after the end of the graveyard watch. Beyond the open stern window, the sky was bright with moonlight. It took James a moment to notice there was a man in the window.

Sparrow had ducked under the casement to crouch on the sill like a monkey, knees drawn up to his chest, dripping sea water onto the deck. He was nude, and the light from the close, heavy moon drew silver edges on his wet body. James couldn't see his face, but he could feel the press of Sparrow's eyes.

Holding his breath, he waited for Sparrow to move, but Sparrow never moved. With a deep start, he realized that Sparrow was waiting for him. What happened next was his responsibility, then; the next few minutes, which might very well throw his life into even greater disarray, would be of his own creation. Strangely, it was not a difficult decision. In the dreamlike thickness of the dark, all of the protestations of his more civilized self seemed like so much air—a senseless waste of time. People he loved were dead, and for all he knew he would soon be too, and at least in Sparrow's presence he felt something—confusion, embarrassment, a disturbing loss of control—painful sensations like the blood returning to a sleeping limb—but they were the feelings of a living man. With shaking fingers, he found the hem of his shirt and pulled it over his head. The cool air on his flushed skin set every hair on end, and he lay back with his heart in his mouth, shivering with nerves, dropping the shirt to the deck.

The silhouette in the window didn't move. His face grew hot; perhaps he had misunderstood. Sparrow's gaze, hidden in velvety shadows, laid on him like a physical touch, and James eased into the shock of it, of being seen. His prick was hard, and he was doing nothing to hide it, and he had never done anything like this before, simply allowed someone to look at him this way. All sound had gone out of the world except for his breath and his heart. He held still.

At last, Sparrow dropped down from the window. James let out a shuddering breath, then gasped it in again; Sparrow stood beside him, his body radiating heat through the canvas of the bunk. A rough, jeweled hand tickled the inside of his knee and trailed up his thigh.

He jerked when Sparrow's mouth touched his prick. For one last time, he resisted the outlandishness of what he was doing; then his resistance faded in a rush of pleasure that was so much more real than his mind's weak objections. The pleasure halted for a moment, and then Sparrow was clambering on top of him into the bunk, covering him in warmth. The knittles suspending them from the beams groaned as they wrestled, tangling their limbs together, and then Sparrow sat up, the shadows on his face shifting as he smiled.

"I've never done this," blurted James.

"With a fellow, you mean." Sparrow's voice was low and amused. "The beauty of it is that you need only recall how you do yourself. Like so—" He drew James's hand between his legs. "It won't take much, I promise..."

They grasped each other's pricks and thrust against each other, and Sparrow uttered a breathy laugh as the bunk swayed. James shut his eyes, then opened them again, missing the sight. When Sparrow sat up to draw his dense, ropey hair into a queue, he pulled the flesh of his belly and ribs taut and exposed his pale underarms, and James took the chance to run his hands curiously over

sharp hips and smooth sides, across inked skin and tiny dark nipples. Such a different body from his own.

They returned their hands to each other's pricks. For a moment, everything was too intense, moving too quickly. "Sparrow," James choked, suddenly and inexplicably terrified, "I don't—I need—"

"Hush." In the dark face, a gold tooth glinted. "We'll get you sorted." Without any further warning than that, Sparrow bent and swallowed James's prick, and in a surge that dimmed the world for a moment he came, hot and sweet and pulsing into Sparrow's mouth. Afterward, Sparrow rubbed himself against James's belly, and once he'd regained some command over his limbs James worked a hand between their bodies to help—as though he had any idea what he was doing—until Sparrow buried his face in James's neck and came with a sharp, voiceless gasp.

They clung together, panting hard. When Sparrow kissed him again, he breathed Sparrow's breath and tasted his own come, which was thrilling and strange. His blood pounded in his head. He wanted to stay there, away from the real, but Sparrow's presence pulled him back—like the spectral guide in Dante's poem, drawing him first down and then back up, out into the world again, where he could see the stars.

In the ensuing silence, his mind, which had gone blissfully still, began to work again. What a mess Sparrow must think him, what a complicated muddle. But for whatever reason, through all the perplexing contradictions of their association, Sparrow wanted him. He shut his eyes at the wonder of it. Then he opened them, and wondered how he was going to get through the coming day without losing his mind.

Somewhere above their heads, five bells struck. "Another few minutes and it's going to be hard for you to get out of here," he said to Sparrow, who had begun to snore.

Sparrow roused and blinked. "I have ways," he said, but he climbed out of the bunk. "Wait for my signal." He gave James a kiss, quick but deep, then slipped out the window. James listened for a splash, but none came.

Chapter End Notes

Jack's Latin phrases mean: "God be with you," "happy birthday," and "farewell!"

In which words cannot be unsaid

Chapter Notes

Explicit content in this chapter

27 March, 1741

James put the spyglass down. "Three small batteries, but they're abandoned," he said. "For a while, it would appear."

"Can we be sure?" Captain Mayne of the *Worcester* sat beside him in the cutter.

"I am always sure," said James flatly. "Don Blas does not hesitate to abandon fortifications he doesn't have the troops to man. Now let us go see if that sluice and that derrick are operational."

Across the harbor, boats were towing the *Galicia* out of the channel. James watched them as the carpenter and his mates examined the old wooden sluice and the boatswain rigged tackles to the loading derrick at the end of the abandoned wharf. Soon water was pouring down the sluice, and by early afternoon, the *Worcester* had filled her water casks. It was blazing hot, and James and Mayne stripped to their waistcoats. James tried to ignore all the little aches—places where Sparrow had bit and sucked, or rubbed and chafed, or squeezed. He didn't have space in his head for a love affair now—especially one so completely beyond the pale.

"Ahoy!" A pinnace pulled round the bend in the creek. She was under sail and her men were heaving on their oars. As she drew closer, a curious craft came into view, towed behind. The lieutenant in the pinnace scurried up the ladder onto the wharf. "There's half a dozen more of 'em a mile up the river—a funny sort of dugout. They'll each hold twenty tons, easy."

"It appears they're ideal for watering the fleet," said James. "Captain Mayne, you shall have this task. Send boats to collect the empty casks from all the ships. Start with the transports."

"But won't the Admiral—"

"I'll handle the Admiral," said James with a tight smile.

A visit to his ship informed him that a lieutenant from the Admiral's flagship had already visited to request his presence, and ten minutes later, his barge nudged itself carefully up to the laboring *Princess Caroline*. From above floated the music of the fife and the rhythmic stamp of the men around the capstan, and underneath that, the grind and groan of the massive warps fixed to the shore inching her forward between the reefs. The easterly headwind through the channel made it impossible to enter under sail, so every vessel would have to drag herself through with warps and anchors.

Vernon sat in his stateroom. "Ah, Norrington." He shuffled his papers—intelligence reports, most likely, and letters brought in the last day from Port Royal. "How did Paso Caballos look?"

"Abandoned for quite some time. But we did find a water supply and several large dugout hulks that should allow us to water the fleet before it reaches the top of the harbor. I gave Mayne instructions to begin, and to relieve the troops first, as their supplies are dangerously—"

"No." Vernon pushed his papers away. "No no *no*, Norrington. How many times do I have to tell you? You are not to encourage Wentworth in any way, do you hear me?"

"I'm not concerned with the General," said James, "but with his men, a third of whom are desperately ill."

"That's not your problem. If the General wants to look after his men, he can start cooperating with me. Is that understood?" Vernon leaned forward and fixed James with a glare. "Is that *understood*, Norrington?"

James nodded.

"I'm beginning to wonder about you." Vernon returned to his correspondence. "You'd better start showing a little more loyalty to me or I'm going to stop giving you things to do. There are plenty of other excellent officers in this fleet who don't talk back to me, and I've just about had it with you."

Shaking with impotent anger, James snapped at his coxswain to steer northward to the center of the bay, where he'd have a good command of Tierra Bomba. He scanned the marshy shore for Sparrow's signal—a bolt of white cloth on a picket—but no bright scrap fluttered amid the shrubs. "Back to the ship," he said, sick in his heart, and tucked the glass in his coat.

He shut himself in his day cabin and paced to the windows and back. There were twenty more minutes before the drums beat for the wardroom's dinner and this was his day to join them. He paced again and paused, focusing on the handle of the door. He needed Vernon's ear if he was to do any good at all, and to keep it he would have to be silent—but silence was unconscionable. This wasn't just his career at stake, this was thousands of lives. Yet what could he do? For the first time in his life, thinking led to nothing, just an agonized repeating of the question over and over until he wanted to hold his ears.

"I take it you've been to see the Admiral," said a voice, and he spun around so hard he stumbled against the door. Sparrow stood up from where he'd been crouching behind a cannon, then sat and straddled it with a crooked smile. A stab of desire shot to James's groin.

He smoothed down his coat in the front. "Dammit! It's broad daylight, how did you even—"

Sparrow invaded his space, laying his fingers over James's mouth. They tasted dirty. "Trade secrets, mate," he said, and replaced his fingers with his lips.

James slid sideways out from under him. "Why didn't you signal? Do you have information? What the hell is going on, you—"

"Here's how this works." Sparrow drew close, snaking hands around James's waist, and this time, James's scattered wits couldn't help him. "You get what you want—" Sparrow patted his breast pocket, which crinkled, "—and I—" he nipped James's chin, and then his neck, "—get what *I* want."

"Is that what this is? An exchange?" James frowned, but his body was too exhausted to do anything but acquiesce.

Sparrow flashed him a smile. "We all need a reason to stay in the game, Gov'nor," he growled, and pushed him against the door.

There was a knock just behind James's ear. He broke out in a fresh sweat and waved Sparrow back behind the gun, then straightened his wig. He felt dizzy. "Enter," he said.

Forrest opened the door cautiously. "Captain Mayne's compliments, sir," he said. "He received your instructions to water the rated ships before attending to the transports."

"Good." James cleared his throat. "Mr. Forrest"—he hid his shaking hands behind his back—"I am out of sorts. Give my regrets to the wardroom that I shan't be joining them for dinner."

"Aye, sir." Forrest peered at him. "Should I pass the word for the surgeon?"

"No." James searched the young man's face for signs that his anxiety was showing. "Anyone who disturbs me will find himself facing a bleak future indeed. Is that clear?"

Forrest paled, confused. "Of course, sir." He shut the door.

James turned, trembling, and then Sparrow was on him. He stumbled back into the bulkhead and struggled around the kiss, sweating, breathing hard through his nose, while Sparrow pulled roughly at his clothes. The pleasant flutter in his stomach as Sparrow nearly garroted him with his cravat scared him half to death; then his waistcoat was open and hands followed cool air inside, feeling around his sweaty shirt, thumbs rubbing his nipples. He broke the kiss and gasped, tingling and nauseous and hot.

"I'm losing my mind," he said hoarsely as Sparrow's breath and whiskers tickled under his ear.

"Shh," said Sparrow, and kissed his throat, and his chin, and his mouth. Either Sparrow understood these things better than he did, or he didn't care if James went mad or not.

"Sparrow—I think I'm going cr—Sparrow!" James pulled back. "Help me."

Sparrow leaned in. "What's the worst that can happen? Out there, men are dyin' in scores at the whim of a mad admiral. In here, the only danger is that you might enjoy yourself." He nibbled James's ear.

James gasped. "This is unthinkable, Sparrow, I"—Sparrow squeezed him through his breeches—"I haven't missed—dinner with the wardroom in—five years—"

"Welcome to life on the edge," Sparrow smiled into his neck. "Now, ease off on the mainsheet, eh, Gov'nor?"

James nodded, swallowing hard, and shut his eyes.

He was suddenly looking at the door, his face pressed against wood, and Sparrow was up close behind him. His coat and waistcoat came off of a piece, and James made to pull off his wig, but Sparrow stopped him. "Humor me," he said. "It's a fantasy of mine."

"I'm not sure I want to know about your fantasies," James murmured, suddenly self-conscious.

Sparrow laughed. "I have a whole heap of 'em. I have an indexed file. Norrington in uniform, Norrington out of it. Norrington bound hand an' foot, wearing nothin' but a little pink bonnet—"

"Oh, do shut up." James squeezed his eyes closed and leaned his forehead against the door.

Mercifully, Sparrow obliged. He fumbled with James's breeches. "A little help here," he growled, and James helped with shaking hands, letting Sparrow ruck his shirt up so that cool air struck his bare arse and hard prick and twitching belly. He felt ridiculous, and aroused, and relieved not to be in control.

Sparrow pulled away, and a metal hinge squeaked—he was dipping his hand in the oil of the signal lamp. James hadn't given much thought to the mechanics before, but the lamp oil in all its gross materiality suddenly made everything too real, especially once he realized what Sparrow was planning. When oiled fingers slid between his buttocks, he panicked. "Sparrow—I can't—"

"All right, then." Sparrow seemed untroubled. "Some other time." The fingers moved forward to press behind his bollocks, and he felt a pleasure so alien he jerked away. Immediately he regretted it, and pushed back, hardly believing what he was doing, forehead pressed so hard against the door it had begun to hurt. Sparrow massaged him in that most unspeakable of places. This was a sort of pleasure they'd never told him about, or else he'd have fallen into wickedness long ago.

Everything down below was slippery. "Don't fear, now, you'll like this," Sparrow said, and replaced his fingers with his cock in the slick crevice, pushing against that divine spot, and sighing with relief into James's shoulder. "Close your legs tighter," he muttered, and James obeyed the order, so filthy in its specificity. For a while they grunted and ground together, Sparrow's breath hot on his neck, Sparrow's palm wet and rough on his prick, the air full of the smell of sex and sweat and the sound of ragged breaths and groans. He willed his mind to stop, but a part of him kept observing himself, marveling at his depravity. The rest of him pressed back in search of more hot skin. At some point, he turned his head and found Sparrow's mouth in an awkward, incomplete kiss. Then he shuddered and a wordless joy welled in his chest before breaking into a fluid cry, and he was sobbing into his fist as Sparrow held his hips and thrust hard. Then, startling stillness, filled with stunned panting.

James cleaned himself up in a daze. Sparrow didn't bother, sucking their effluvia from his fingers with a satisfied smile. James watched him with disgust and desire.

He dropped into a chair with a great sigh, not knowing what to say, frustrated with Sparrow's smug silence. "So, Captain Sparrow," he said, "now that you've got what you wanted, might you show me what *I* want?"

"Don't play cool with me," Sparrow grinned, reaching into his coat. "I've already seen too much of you. Here." He handed over a packet of papers.

James flipped through them, focusing his eyes through his post-coital drowsiness. "Anything about *el paisano*?"

"Nope. Just look."

One piece of paper was large enough to have been folded several times. "What's this?"

"Soundings for the inner harbor. Water's too shallow to approach the city walls without 'em."

"Sparrow, my God." James looked up from the chart. "How—"

"There's good fishing in that harbor, I discovered. Nobody noticed a man in a boat with a lead line instead of a fishing rod."

James spread out the chart. The trapezoidal outlines of Cartagena's inner harbor looked back at him, sprinkled with numerals representing the depth of the water. There was a large shoal at the harbor mouth, and then past it to the northwest was a narrow channel of six fathoms into an inner lagoon that ran right up to the city walls. A ship that could squeeze through it would be in easy range to bombard the city and the great fort of San Lázaro that protected it.

After a moment, he squinted at a set of peculiar squiggles. "What on Earth are these?"

"Notes on the quality of the bottom, of course."

"In what language?"

"My own shorthand."

"Why couldn't you use the standard notation?"

"Too complicated."

James sighed. "You're going to have to explain what all these cabalistic little marks mean."

Jack grinned. "No problem, Gov'nor. You just sit there, an' I'll look over your shoulder, an' you point, an' I'll explain."

"Fine...what's this one mean?"

"That would be 'fine sand, some broken shell.'"

"Remarkable. And this?"

"Very fine sand, a smidgeon of silt."

"I suppose this oval with a dot in the middle represents 'a smidgeon'?"

"Now you're catching on. A square with a dot means 'a tad.'"

"What's the damn difference?"

"Let's move on..."

After several minutes of squinting, pointing and explaining, Sparrow ran a finger down James's neck from ear to collar. After another minute, he laid his mouth against James's neck, then slipped a hand down his chest.

James twitched away. "Good heavens—you're insatiable."

"Mmm..." Sparrow's mouth returned to James's neck, and this time James let him stay. "The day I'm sated, sew me up in sailcloth with a few round shot and toss me overboard."

James smiled. When Sparrow kissed his way up to his ear, he leaned back and let his eyes slip closed.

"I love your ears." Sparrow nibbled. "They're so...pink...so *English*..."

"If you're not English," James asked, opening his eyes, "then what are you?"

"No idea." Sparrow swung himself into James's lap and draped his arms around James's neck. "I'm told I sound like a Dublin sailor screwed a Virginia tobacco heiress, but I guess we'll never know."

James dodged a kiss. "So who raised you?"

"Whores, mostly. I retain a fondness for them to this day."

"And? How did the—you know—the piracy come about?"

"Now that's a story." Sparrow forgot his kissing assault, delighted by the sound of his own voice.

"Once upon a time, I was as law-abidin' a sailor as ever there was. I was chief mate aboard a pokey little merchantman, happy to do naught but sail back an' forth on the East India trade till the day I died. Then one day off Madagascar, we were attacked by pirates. The captain was a big intimidating chap, an' he gave us all a choice: join his crew, or go to the deep. We all elected to join, of course, bein' sensible fellows, an' so began my career in piracy."

James frowned. He had expected a tall tale, some improbable adventure full of mermaids, treasure maps and self-aggrandizement. Of course, Sparrow delighted in confounding expectations, even if he had to resort to the mundane to do so. "I don't believe a word of it," James smirked. "On principle."

Sparrow flashed a grin. "You're too quick for me." The grin faded and he stood up. "Well, better be gettin' on. Watch is about to change—best time to slip away."

"See what you can find out about that spy. And be careful." Impetuously, James grabbed his hand, spread the fingers, and kissed the dirt-seamed palm. Sparrow gave him a lickerish smile. "I await your signal," James said, struggling to steady his voice. He didn't know if it was desire or fear or happiness that was making it shake.

The fingers stroked his cheek as they withdrew. Only after Sparrow had climbed out the window did James think to wonder how he had got aboard without getting wet.

In the morning, Forrest met him on deck. "Feeling better, sir?"

"Hm?" James remembered his lie to the wardroom just in time. "Ah, yes, thank you. Any developments?" He scanned the ships in the harbor. In the night, the *Princess Caroline* had crawled up the harbor as far as the eastern tip of Tierra Bomba, and *Orford* and *Burford* sat just inside the channel.

"Nothing, except for a rumor going round," said Forrest, lips tight and face blank.

"Oh?"

"That the General asked the Admiral for three supply-boats to fish for turtles for the sick, and the Admiral refused. But like I said, sir," he went on, answering James's incredulous look with an expressionless shrug, "it's just a rumor."

James put his forehead in his hand. What could he do? If he disobeyed orders, he lost the position from which to do anything useful at all. His opinion obviously held no weight with Vernon, so persuasion was out. He tried to think like Sparrow, but subterfuge didn't come naturally to him. He remembered Sparrow's hot hands on his hips, his hot breath on his neck, and felt ill. He and Sparrow had no right to be carrying on like this while men were dying, but if he stopped—his stomach lurched. He couldn't stop.

"Sir? Are you all right?"

"What? Oh. Apologies, Lieutenant." James rubbed his temple. "I haven't had my breakfast yet."

Breakfast was coffee, an egg, and maggoty biscuit. He tapped the biscuit automatically, sending the wriggling things scattering, and scanned the purser's accounts. All manner of dishonesty went on in a ship's provisioning and no one ever did anything about it—so what if a few things went missing? He was thinking like Sparrow now; it wasn't so hard after all. If someone borrowed a couple of those dugout hulks for a bit of turtle-fishing, no one would ever need to know James was behind it. Now that Moore was dead, his surest bet was Armstrong.

At three o'clock, James ordered out his barge. The scene on Tierra Bomba was even more depressing than he'd expected. Piles of supplies, carelessly stacked powder stores, crates of tools and cannon waiting to be re-embarked were jumbled up with sick and dying men, who all seemed to be lying where they'd fallen, shivering with fever and calling for water. The smell of human filth and blood was everywhere. James clapped his handkerchief to his mouth and hurried through in search of the engineers.

"Captain Armstrong," said James, jogging up behind the engineer where he was supervising the packing of a great deal of surveying equipment.

Armstrong looked up. "C-captain Norrington!" His eyes were wide. "Does the Admiral require something?"

"No, no." James took his shoulder and steered him away from the others. "I'm here on my own. I only wished to apprise you of the fleet's business these last two days."

"Oh, well—" Armstrong glanced at him uncertainly, "—that's very kind of you, sir."

"I've noticed," said James, "that the sickness is increasing in the troops."

"Oh yes, at a prodigious rate. If we're called upon to throw up a battery against the city, I don't reckon we'll manage."

"Indeed. I dare say you stand badly in need of fresh water and provisions."

"The surgeon says it's that pestilential *serena* that brings the sickness. Typical of the tropics, he says—"

"I'm aware of that theory of illness," said James. "I've lived here for a decade, so you may trust my unprofessional opinion that poor food and water go a lot farther toward making men ill than a bit of dew after dark."

"Still, with the men lying so many nights on their arms, with their tents still aboard the supply-tenders—"

"Yes, yes, I agree. Captain Armstrong, let me tell you something. Captain Mayne and I spent yesterday securing a source of fresh water at the creek of Paso Caballos. We also captured several large dugout boats, ideal for watering and turtling."

"You don't say," said Armstrong.

"Listen to me," said James. "Those boats shall be employed in watering the fleet until the end of the afternoon watch. After that, they shall be tied up at the wharf at Paso Caballos, unused."

"That's...very interesting," said Armstrong with a confused look.

"Do we understand one another?"

Armstrong's confusion turned to dismay. "I don't rightly know what you're talking about, sir."

"Oh, for God's sake." Why did Moore have to die? "Armstrong," James hissed, "I may not, under my current orders, offer assistance to the Army. But no one has ordered me not to show the Army how to assist themselves. Do I have your complete and total confidence?"

"Of course, Captain Norrington." Armstrong smiled. "You're one of the good ones, as we say

around camp." He appeared to regret his words instantly, but James pressed on.

"Then do me a favor and pretend we've never spoken, but take this intelligence under consideration."

Armstrong nodded. James heaved a sigh of relief, and fled. The less time he spent at the camp, the less chance he'd be suspected if and when the Army took matters into their own hands. He picked his way over the rows of groaning men, hurrying with his head down until he could breathe again.

At five o'clock the next morning, James awoke to the sound of cannon fire. He hurried up on deck and trained his glass on the mouth of the inner harbor, where *Burford* and *Orford* were moored.

"They began about an hour ago," said the master's mate, who had the watch.

Two forts stood on either side of the narrow entrance of the inner harbor, but neither were returning fire. As James looked closer, he could see that the ships were scouring the shore, cutting off Spanish communication by water. Once the fleet was inside the inner harbor, Lezo would be besieged. All that would remain then was for them to reduce the fort on the hill of San Lázaro that defended the city.

He turned his glass on Paso Caballos, and saw with both relief and dread that the hulks were gone. But there was no one on the wharf; the sluice stood quiet.

At the turning of the forenoon watch, *Princess Caroline* signaled for James to come aboard.

In the stateroom, James found Vernon, Ogle and Lestock. The looks on their faces put him in mind of a court-martial. This was it, then. He let his mind go blank and hard.

"You are aware of what happened yesterday evening?" said Vernon softly.

"I am not, sir," said James.

"Oh, I think you are."

"Norrington," Ogle put in, "you will swear to us that you had nothing to do with General Wentworth's attempt to commandeer Navy property."

He made his best attempt at an expression of surprise. "I swear it," he said.

"Look me in the eye," said Vernon, "and vow to me you knew nothing of any attempt to use those hulks to water the Army."

James gazed at him. "I swear upon my life and that of the King that I had no knowledge of it," he said.

Lying was remarkably easy when you had the strength of your convictions. This must have been what it was like to be Elizabeth. He allowed himself a little smile. Both of them were students of Sparrow, after all.

So Armstrong and Wentworth had bungled their chance. James's days as liaison to the Army were undoubtedly over, along with any other useful position. He'd sacrificed it for no gain at all. He ought to have been relieved, now that there was nothing he could do. But the anxiety was worse. What dreary things consciences were.

He'd certainly blown his opportunity to present Sparrow's harbor soundings. Back on his ship, he

signaled the *Experiment* for her captain to come aboard. Rentone still possessed favorable capital with the Admiral and James needed it.

He stepped into his day cabin and shut the door. Everywhere he looked reminded him of what he'd done the day before, and he leaned back against the door with a full-body shiver, shutting his eyes, fearing for his sanity for the tenth time in as many hours.

On his desk, he uncovered the soundings, and stared for a moment at the familiar handwriting, annotated beneath with his tight print. Then he noticed something else.

Right before he'd gone aboard the *Worcester* the day before, he'd left a letter from Swann on top of the pile of papers—a personal letter. It was no longer there. Flipping quickly through the papers, he found it near the bottom. He had no memory of moving it. He hadn't noticed in the morning when he'd grabbed the purser's accounts, but he noticed now, and his memory for such details was beyond question. Someone had gone through his things.

It was probably Sparrow—the man had no notion of personal boundaries at all. The top of James's desk contained no sensitive information—he kept the private signals and secret papers locked up—but he didn't like the idea of Sparrow rifling through them. On a whim, he knelt to examine the lock on the bottom drawer where the secret signals resided. And there it was: scoring around the keyhole, where someone had attempted to force it.

He sat down on the floor, sick to his stomach. Surely Sparrow hadn't betrayed him—but why not? He loved to think he'd domesticated the man, but it was absurd to believe that Sparrow might suddenly reverse the habit of a lifetime and confine his dishonesty to one political side. Men did not change their natures any more than wild beasts.

For ten minutes, he sat with his forehead on his knees. After the shock had passed, a bit of cold reason crept in. Sparrow would never submit to the risks of double-agency; he was too self-interested for that. Yet it was hard to ignore what a perfect double agent he would make—through James, he had access to a wealth of intelligence on the English fleet. True, the Spanish had never behaved as though they held privileged information, and there was the matter of the spy, *el paisano*—but what if he was Sparrow's invention, a decoy to cover Sparrow's own activities? James had only ever seen evidence of him in Sparrow's copied hand. His mind raced back and forth. He was still holding the harbor soundings, and he unfolded them again. Could they be trusted? Once Rentone arrived, would James be spreading poison through the fleet?

In all the bloody mess of this war, one thing had kept him going: that Sparrow was his friend. If that were gone—he wasn't certain his wits could weather it. However, the words on his commission were clear. He would do his duty, whether it destroyed him or not.

Jack's body was pleased with him, but his mind was not. Sneaking aboard the *Dauntless* under a tarpaulin in a boat was another story for the legend, certainly, and his prick had assured him it was a brilliant idea, but in hindsight it had been a spectacularly stupid risk. He remembered Norrington shivering with nerves as he pulled his nightshirt over his head, and nearly stumbled. Jack had wanted things before—his ship, which was his second self—money—but nothing that made his body blind and clumsy with need. He should call it off, let Norrington down with some excuse—but who was he kidding? He'd have left Cartagena weeks ago if he'd had any sense left.

He stole a Spanish uniform and musket from the back of a cart—returned from burials, most likely, since it was full of personal effects—and made for the city gate. He'd learned Spanish in New Grenada so he wasn't worried about his accent this time, but he didn't cut a very spit-and-polish figure. He stuffed his hair into his cap and hoped for the best.

"Name and battalion?" shouted a guard from the gate.

"Er...Joaquín Gorrión." He checked his uniform. "Aragón battalion." At least he thought those were the fellows in green.

"Where have you been?"

"Out scouting."

"The major didn't tell us anything about returning scouts."

"It must have slipped his mind. Look, can you let me in? I'm feeling a bit exposed out here."

The men laughed and opened the gate. Nothing warmed people up to a fellow like cowardice.

The streets were empty of anyone other than soldiers. Most of the townspeople had fled into the countryside, and the ones who were left apparently thought locking their doors would help. Either that, or they didn't like soldiers. A few men looked at him strangely—he obviously wouldn't have passed any sane muster—but no one stopped him. He tried to bear himself in fine military fashion, and followed the trail of soldiers back to their hive.

At headquarters, he was disappointed to find only one harried lieutenant-colonel and no Lezo or Eslava. After twenty minutes of eavesdropping, he concluded that the Admiral and the Viceroy had removed to San Lázaro once they had lost their quarters on the *Galicia*. Jack chuckled. He may not have been the pirate he once was, but he had his moments.

Chewing over the problem of how he was going to get into the fort, he crept along side streets, attaching himself to the back of a marching column every so often, which led him across the bridge from the suburb of Getsemaní into the city center. At once the buildings became grander, full of soaring white arches and plazas with fountains. The Spanish couldn't be blamed for not wanting to give the place up.

As he walked along a palm-lined avenue, a low building with a flat red roof caught his eye—mostly because it was surrounded by soldiers. He knew that the more guns, the more shiny stuff was inside, but there was no way he could get past all those soldiers to investigate. He cast around, looking for something to use as a distraction. Then he remembered his uniform.

"What do you want?" asked the guard.

"Need to have a word with the store-keeper," said Jack, straightening his back and speaking with what he hoped was a military snap. "Lieutenant-Colonel's orders."

The guard shrugged and stepped aside.

Jack skipped down the rows of barrels stacked ceiling-high. So here was where they'd put everything off those lovely treasure galleons. Some of it had probably already been traded, but there was still enough to burst King George's coffers. Drawing a knife out of his boot, he pried loose the lid of a nearby hogshead, and gasped at what he found inside.

Jesuit's bark. He pried open half a dozen more barrels nearby. All of them contained the spongy red chips that the Indians had been using to treat tropical fevers for centuries. If the English Army had a few barrels of this—

"Thanks, gentlemen," he chirped to the guards as he left. All thoughts of infiltrating the fort forgotten, he hurried out of the city, eager to make his signal to Norrington before the light died.

James stood beside Rentone, who was bent over Sparrow's soundings. "What do you make of them?"

Rentone traced the mouth of the harbor with his finger. "I can't say, sir. I know that these shoals in the channel are right, and the width of the channel certainly looks right, but the rest—I simply can't say."

James sighed. "I received this chart from an intelligence source I cannot name. I have since come to suspect that this source is not entirely trustworthy."

"Well, if we try to sound the water anywhere near the city walls, we risk running aground or getting shot, so the only thing for it is—well, is to reckon whether you trust your source."

"Dammit, Rentone—" James sat. "I don't know what to do."

With orders to copy the chart, Rentone returned to his ship. On deck, James scanned the coast of Tierra Bomba with a heavy heart. His breath caught on a spot of white.

After the sun set, he went ashore under the pretext of meeting with Armstrong. Lantern in one hand and compass in the other, he picked his way inland, over patches of marsh, through dense copses, around scummy pools of standing water. Sparrow's instructions were clear, at least—west by north from his landing place, five hundred paces. James counted off the paces as best he could on the terrain, and the five hundredth landed him in a clearing. It was empty.

Weary and desolate, James lifted his eyes—and there was the moon, huge and yellow just above the trees, as abruptly present as a face. The dead hum of insects filled his mind, in the hot still air that seemed to have no knowledge of human voices. Sparrow had been such a lambent thought once, a bright thing far above the horror, but now he was one more part of this muddy nightmare. Yet what if James was wrong about him? He didn't trust himself. All was dark.

Jack saw the lantern appear and vanish and reappear through the trees. He wove toward it until he could see the man, who had stopped in the middle of a clearing, hat dangling from his fingers, his lantern-lit face so nakedly forlorn that Jack regretted his stifled laugh. Jack let it go on a moment longer before raising a hand to his mouth and saying, "Psst!"

Norrington turned toward him, his tall figure uncoiling, his lips pressing into a line.

"Ah-ah!" Jack held up a finger. "Just...come here."

He led Norrington by the hand into the undergrowth. "I assumed you had longer strides," he said.

"I assumed you meant to get me lost in the woods."

Jack grinned. "Show a little trust, mate." He squeezed Norrington's hand. "I've got interesting news for you. An' you for me, I'd imagine, related to whatever had your breeches in a bunch yesterday. That admiral of yours requires pirate tactics."

"I tried. It was—somewhat less than a success."

Norrington's voice was strange—flat, somehow, and reluctant. He didn't return Jack's grasp, merely letting Jack tug him along. They stepped out into another clearing. "See?" said Jack. "The ground's drier here."

Norrington looked around, dazed. Jack pushed him down onto an army blanket he'd spread under a tree. "Now, before we talk..." He covered Norrington's mouth with his.

Norrington didn't kiss back. Lamenting that he couldn't have got involved with someone normal, Jack kissed more insistently, following Norrington as he pulled away.

"Dammit, Sparrow." A gentle push. "Can we talk and not fuck for just a moment?"

"Where I'm from, we call this kissing," said Jack.

"For God's sake!"

This was not Norrington's usual coy distress. He was hugging himself like he was cold. Jack let him go.

"Tell me your information." Norrington appeared to get hold of himself. "The reason you raised the signal."

"Ah." Jack stretched out on his side. "I had a peek into the customs-house today. The sick men in your Army would be very interested in what I found: Jesuit's bark."

Norrington blinked. "Oh."

Jack grinned. "Just gotta figure out how to steal it."

"That—does pose a problem."

"Give me a bit of time an' opportunity, an' there's nothing I can't steal."

"Except your ship."

Jack glared at him. "Oi, no need to rub it in!"

Norrington was staring into the darkness. Their encounters were always lubricated by this silly banter, but this time he was barely paying attention. Jack pushed him flat. "Enough business."

Norrington gazed up at him strangely. "You used to hate me," he murmured.

"A little." Jack kissed his jaw. "Still wanted to fuck you, though."

Norrington gave a startled laugh. Jack got up on his elbows. "Want to hear what I thought about doing to you?"

"No." Norrington shut his eyes. "I want you to do it."

"W-what?" Through a surge of arousal, Jack heard the strange flatness of Norrington's voice.

Norrington tightened his hold on Jack's waist. "Just rummage around in that indexed file of yours," he said, "find something from those days when you loathed the sight of me, and do...it...to...me."

Jack blinked into Norrington's unfocused gaze. The Commodore had surprised him so far with his willingness to let Jack run the show, but this was something new, this request for—what? Abuse? Punishment?

He didn't need to be told twice. "Just remember you asked for it," he muttered, seizing Norrington's wrists and pinning them. "Just remember that."

Of all the ideas he could have pulled from his file, he chose the simplest, the one right on top. He had to imagine that Norrington was lying across his big cherrywood desk in Fort Charles, but otherwise, it was just as he'd pictured—the brushed and polished Commodore beneath him, lips parted, eyes half-closed, watching Jack tear open the fine tailored uniform. To his disappointment, buttons didn't go flying—what a terrible time for good craftsmanship. Still, the fabric tore a bit. He seized the collar of the ruffled shirt and split it down to the hem. Norrington hissed and arched, but kept still, watching him.

In the light, he really was as beautiful as Jack had feared. Jack didn't want to hurt him or teach him some kind of lesson, not really. He wasn't deeply imaginative about these things—mostly he just liked a warm, willing person who'd let him put his prick where he wanted. He slipped his thumb into Norrington's mouth and growled at the instant suction. Should he...? Well, he had two places in mind for his prick to go and he had a feeling he would only get away with one of them. There was no telling how long this mood of Norrington's would last.

Shoes, stockings and breeches went by the board. Norrington held oddly still, but he was breathing hard, his skin was flushed and damp, his cock was rigid against his belly, and he made a pleased sound every time Jack bit him or kissed him somewhere sensitive. Jack pulled his hips forward so he could kneel between his thighs. Good Lord, what a sight. Half nude in the ruins of a brand new uniform and a thirty-guinea wig nearly out of its tie—God had never made anything so beautiful. He fought his sash and belt off, eased his breeches down, and lowered himself on top of his squirming victim.

"This is what you wanted to do to me?" Norrington sounded bewildered.

"What, not cruel enough for you?" Jack sat back up and reached for the unlit lantern at the edge of the blanket. "No complaints, now. You did say whatever I wanted."

Norrington tensed when Jack's slippery hand went between his legs, and his prick lost some of its ardor for the few moments it took Jack to reach that spot that made all men question everything they thought they knew. After that, there seemed no reason to wait. The pain in Norrington's cry was an echo of that first terrible night when they'd kissed and clung together, hiding from death. Jack gripped the sweaty backs of Norrington's knees and closed his eyes, falling into the blissful trance of fucking, listening with a smile to Norrington's panting breaths, his little groans, his occasional mournful cry. "Sweet lad," Jack murmured. "Sweet, sweet lad..."

He hadn't meant to be so gentle, but he felt too at peace to drudge up old rancors. His hand found its way to Norrington's prick and Norrington tightened around him with a grateful sob, and they came together that way, hot and slippery and saying each other's names into the warm night that had gone silent around them.

As Jack put his clothes to rights, Norrington stirred, then sat up and ran a hand over his tousled wig, muzzy and confused. Jack passed him his breeches. They dressed in what Jack thought was companionable silence, until he leaned in for a kiss and was firmly put off.

He sighed. "All right. Now what?"

"Sparrow." Norrington rubbed his temples. "I—I must ask you something."

Jack rolled his eyes. The Commodore was incapable of simply enjoying himself without thinking, and somehow it had become Jack's job to humor his crisis of morality or masculinity or whatever it was that was eating him.

"Did you go through my papers?" Norrington asked.

Jack frowned. "Say what?"

"On the *Dauntless*. My desk, my papers—the drawer containing the secret signals. Sparrow—" Norrington sucked in a deep breath. "I fear you've been playing me for a fool."

As soon as the words were out of James's mouth, Sparrow's eyes darkened. He drew back into himself, his whole attitude turned strange and hard. "You do, do you?"

"Prove me wrong!" James cried, his confidence disappearing. "Show me some evidence that you have been honest with me. Help me understand—show me your real agenda in this—"

"I've been quite frank about what I want," said Sparrow coldly: "my ship."

"And for all I know, the Spanish promised it to you as well!"

"The Spanish tried to hang me!"

"So did I! And yet somehow we got past it." James was for Sparrow to understand the logic of his doubt. "How can I be sure you don't have the same deal with them?"

"Listen, you bloody halfwit." Sparrow got to his feet. "I wouldn't even *be* here if I weren't—if I—" He threw up his hands. "I've put my arse in harm's way a dozen times this week, for *you*—not for bonny old England, not for Admiral soddin' Vernon, but for you. And now you think I've choused you? You—you colossal—you ungrateful—grah!" He grabbed his head.

James tried to detach himself. It could all be nothing but a display. His heart wanted to believe Sparrow—*needed* to, desperately—but his heart was so rarely his friend.

There was only one thing to do. "I release you from your obligation," James said softly. "Go home. Or wherever it is you go."

Sparrow stared at him, dumb and stunned, before his eyes hardened with fury. "Just like that? After I nearly got meself shot just so you—"

"We were enemies, Sparrow!" James pleaded. "It would only make sense for you to deceive me. I could hardly even blame you for it. Rationally, why should I not suspect you? How can I be certain of you?"

"You know what?" Sparrow bent over and picked up his hat. "You can't. You're right, Commodore—our association ought to end. Farewell, then." He turned toward the edge of the clearing.

A lump rose in James's throat. "Sparrow!"

Sparrow stopped and looked over his shoulder, his eyes cold.

"Take care of yourself," said James.

"Oh, I will. 'Bout bloody time I did." And he vanished into the shadows.

Jack rowed across Boca Grande toward the city, barely looking where he was going. The water was inky and full of sunken masts, but providence bore him across it even though he was careless with grief.

Just like that—it was all over. With the veil lifted, he thought back on the last few weeks with

horror. Some alien impulse had possessed him, one opposed to everything he was, and now just as he had decided to surrender to it, all was swept away. Only his stupidity remained, and his bewilderment, as though he'd woken up to find he'd sleepwalked into a busy street.

So, what now? He tried to remember what his life had been like before Norrington. He had to go on to Havana, like he should have done before. That meant he would have to find a way out of Cartagena, which was a problem. His only option was to walk sixty miles to Santa Marta, which didn't sound like much fun. One night wasn't going to make much difference, and what he wanted more than anything was to be drunk. His uniform made a good passport into a tavern. Or a brothel. Now, there was an idea. Nothing banished the memory of lost love like new love.

In the Getsemaní district, he found a promising establishment. The air was heavy with smoke, perfume, liquor, sex—perfect. He sank down at a gummy table and waved over a well-built girl. Damn, but he'd missed women. "Rum, darling. Keep it coming."

In due time, he had a lapful of solicitous whore. "Hand me my drink, would you, darling? There's a good girl." He took a deep gulp. The girl looked impressed when he surfaced again. "You know," he said to her bosom, "women are so much *kinder* than men. You have no idea."

She cackled. "*I* have no idea? I know exactly what cruel bastards men are." She kissed his cheek. "Present company excluded, of course."

"Of course." Jack sighed. They were so soft and round...he laid his head on top of them. "Wish the world was full of women," he said, closing his eyes. The rum was working. "No men at all..."

"Well, *this* world's full of women," said the whore, shaking him a little. "If you get my meaning."

"Oh, I get it. But, er, not just yet. The liquor's made me a bit—you know."

"Maybe you just need more company." The whore waved over one of her sisters. "Maria! This young gentleman wants to get rid of all the men in the world."

The new whore sat on Jack's other thigh. "Oh, they aren't so bad, some of them," she said, stroking his beard.

"I'll tell you what I hate about them," said Jack, straightening himself. "The way they lead you on and make you crawl through coals for it, then act like it was all *your* idea."

The whores looked at each, confused.

"And—and they act like they've done you a *favor* by screwing you!"

The girls were catching on.

"And they get you to do all sorts of terrible things for them—and then they tell you how terrible you are!"

"Here's to that!" said one of the whores. "Bloody bastards," said the other. "Always up on their high horses."

"High horse. Exactly. I know a fellow whose horse is so high—" he paused for a deep gulp, "—whose horse is so high he could look up the moon's skirt."

The girls roared with laughter.

Ten minutes later, a small crowd of them were perched on and around him. "All sorts of pretty things come out of their mouths!" said one. "But damned if they've forgotten every word of it by morning!"

"Hear, hear!" Jack called. "Don't ever believe a word a man says."

"We know you're nothing like that, love," said the whore on Jack's left knee.

"What? Oh, of course not. Never had any complaints, myself. But men in general—a useless lot." He planted his face firmly between the bosoms of the girl on the right. After a moment, he snored.

He woke in the morning on the street. Sitting up, he held his head and considered the walk to Santa Marta. His ship was out there, waiting for him, but it was so terribly far. He picked himself up and went in search of a bottle.

He wandered through the streets, and eventually plopped down against a wall. Only later did he realize it was the back of the battalion's headquarters. Half-drunk, he listened to two soldiers talking a few yards away around a corner.

"...Admiral ordered the fort abandoned, but he left a little present behind for the English..."

Jack's eyes snapped open.

29 March, 1741

Conquistador and *Dragón* sat in the channel with their broadsides turned out. Over the last three hours, James had watched boats run back and forth as seven galleons were sunk on either side of the shoal. If Don Blas decided to sink those last two ships, the channel would be blocked. Still, James received no orders. So he watched.

With nothing to do, he thought of Sparrow.

He could barely believe what he had let Sparrow do to him. Still, his introduction to sodomy seemed like a minor concern compared to the blunder he'd made afterward. As much as he imagined there to be some great distance between them, the truth was that by now he *knew* Sparrow, and if he'd listened to his intuition for once instead of falling back into his habitual paranoia, he'd have trusted the man. He knew by now that Sparrow was dishonest, but not cold-blooded. For all his disguises, he was never truly anything but Sparrow. Something in James was simply suspicious of happiness in any form, it seemed. That would explain a lot.

Through his spyglass, he watched the Spanish boats come and go. In the afternoon, a number of launches crowded around the rocky base of Castillo Grande on the western side of the channel—they were loading stores into the boats, and men. They were evacuating.

James dispatched this news to the Admiral, and resumed his vigil.

The bell tolled away the afternoon watch. Aboard the *Princess Caroline*, the admirals and generals were meeting to discuss the assault on the city. James had been exiled from these meetings after the incident with the dugout hulks. Although no one had formally accused him of anything, he was now out of favor, with no more power to influence events. He'd managed to make a mess of everything, apparently. The pain of his failures settled in his stomach and lay there like undigested meat. He thought of Sparrow again and cursed himself, then cursed Sparrow, then cursed everything. Each time, it happened this way. Each time, he ruined what fortune gave him.

Late that night, the officer of the watch called him on deck. By the light of the moon, he could make out what was happening: *Conquistador* and *Dragón* were sinking in the channel. He watched them list over and slide under the water with a great churning rush of sea. It was over in a few moments, and then the black water was empty again. Two mighty ships lost. He should have felt something, but all was still and blank inside him. He went back to his bunk.

In the morning, he received his orders. "All hands to unmoor," he bellowed on deck. "Stand in for Castillo Grande."

They drew close enough to draw the fort's fire, if there was anyone left—but the guns were silent. They dropped anchor, and went ashore.

James entered the fort with fifty seamen and a hundred soldiers at his back. "Well," he said, gazing around the deserted parade ground, "we are masters of another empty house, it would seem." He sent men to scour the place from top to bottom to be sure it was empty, and went to set up his command center, for all that he would need it.

By afternoon, most of the guns had been rendered serviceable again—they were still mounted and they had been poorly spiked. Don Blas had left James a cistern full of soggy gunpowder, but James had his own powder stores. Should they need to fight from the fort, they were ready. But there would be no need. Vernon had put James ashore here to keep him busy and out of the way.

"Sir," said Forrest, running up. "There's something you must see."

On the door of the Commandant's quarters was a note. In Sparrow's flamboyant hand, it read, *Don't open this door.*

"Get the scaling ladders," James said to the Marine captain. "Look in through the windows of that room and report what you see. Carefully, if you please."

Twenty minutes later, the men returned with news that the room was stacked high with powder kegs, and to the door handle was rigged a length of yarn tied to a mechanism that appeared to be a flintlock.

"Good God," James breathed. He'd never have expected such savagery from Don Blas. Then it occurred to him that Don Blas might have expected the new tenant of those quarters to be the Admiral.

And Sparrow—Sparrow had warned him, perhaps risking his own life to do so. A little flame of joy leapt in the blackness of his breast. It proved nothing—meant nothing—could even have been staged—but across the distance, he could feel Sparrow's will, and he knew, despite the cold verdict of his mind, what a fool he'd been.

But one note of warning did not mean Sparrow was coming back. It simply meant James could tear himself apart with regret while he lay sleepless in his new bed. Even more than usual, anyway.

That night, Gillette came ashore. He'd been promoted into the *Prince Frederick*, and Beauclerk hung between them like an ugly secret, unacknowledged but acutely felt. They dined in James's bare quarters, both struggling to fill the silences, both mourning their former ease.

"It's getting worse," said Gillette, chewing his cold meat. "This business between Vernon and Wentworth. They're at it like schoolboys."

James nodded. "No good will come of it," he said. There was nothing further to say that was permissible, so they finished their supper without another word.

He lay in bed, eyes open, listening to the silence. It wouldn't last; soon the fleet would pass into the inner harbor and the bomb-ketches would begin firing on the shore. He longed for the sound of cannonfire to drown out his thoughts.

There was a rustle outside the window, and a familiar form hoisted itself inside. James sat up, heart swelling. But Sparrow just crouched there, watching him.

After a moment, Sparrow said, "I assume, since you are not in a thousand little pieces, that you got my note."

James bowed his head. "I'm afraid I've been a little—unfair."

"Ha! Unfair, he says." Sparrow hopped down from the window. "You know, Commodore, it occurs to me that I've made this all rather easy for you."

"What do you mean?"

"I take the risks an' bring you the spoils, which you accept or reject. I climb in your window, not unlike I'm doin' now, an' you let me screw you or you don't. But you, my dear friend, rarely lift a finger."

James frowned. "What would you have me do?"

"Anything! Just—take a bit of bloody responsibility, since you're always on about it!"

"Responsibility?" James gaped. "Sparrow, I am absolutely weighted to the ground with responsibility."

"A certain kind, perhaps. But when it comes to this—" he gestured between them, "—you're a bloody coward."

"I didn't hear you complaining the other night," James muttered.

"Oh no, I'll grant it was lovely—right up to when you made me out for Judas."

"Sparrow, I was a fool, I concede, please—"

Sparrow waved his hand. "I don't mean to put the bloody screws to you. I just think someone ought to share a bit of the burden." He glared. "Someone bein' you." He lifted his chin, and the moonlight washed over his brow and cheeks, sinking his eyes into deep shadow. "Why don't you show *me* some evidence that you've been—honest with me?"

"I swear it, Sparrow, I—" He stopped, sensing that something other than words were necessary, but not knowing what. Terror filled him—the same terror he'd felt on the parapet with Elizabeth, when he'd given her that prepared speech instead of telling her how totally he adored her. But he'd been afraid she would pull away. He got up and advanced on Sparrow, his heart in his throat. Sparrow didn't pull away, but neither was he particularly warm. He didn't move at all.

After a moment of hesitation, James leaned in to kiss him carefully. Sparrow endured it. James kissed his cheeks, his brow. Sparrow didn't move. Frustrated, James sank to his knees and wrapped his arms around Sparrow's waist, and a hand came to rest on his head. It wasn't a caress so much as an acknowledgement.

"I think it's time I went back to lookin' after me own interests," sighed Sparrow, not unkindly. "Havana calls."

James swallowed. "You have every right to leave."

Sparrow shook his head. "Try again."

"Sparrow, please stay."

"Wasn't so hard, was it?" Sparrow grinned joylessly. "Nope, I've had enough. Not much more I can do for you here, anyway. It's been nice, but it's also been bloody stupid, an' there's no way I can keep callin' meself a pirate if I stay a moment longer." He gently detached James's arms from his waist and climbed to the window sill. "I'll think fondly of ya," he said, and hopped out of sight.

James knelt on the stone floor and bent so that his brow touched his knees. That was it, then—one more dream ended. It had been like something out of another life, and now he was back in his own. He knew his duty; he knew why he must get up in the morning. One foot in front of the other. It had always worked before.

In which the battle tries to claim another casualty

Jack spent a chilly night outside the city walls, then wandered back into the countryside to search for the hollow tree where he'd stashed his effects. Once he was himself again, he'd go on to Santa Marta, away from this foolish battle, away from Norrington.

Drinking enough to forget his own name hadn't made it stop hurting. What a laugh—he had real things to worry about, and all he could think of was Norrington's pale skin under his rumpled uniform, his soft sounds of surprise at his own pleasure, his half-open mouth wet from kissing. Jack hoped it would get better.

He counted the paces from one tree to another, shaking his head to disgorge from his pickled brain where he'd put his clothes. Then a voice behind him said, "You there!"

Slowly he turned. A Spanish sergeant of the volunteer regiment stood with pistol drawn. "What are you doing? If you're deserting, this bullet has your name on it."

"No, not deserting!" Jack saluted. "I was—well, it's embarrassing." The sergeant made an impatient motion with his hand. "You see," said Jack, "I was meeting a girl."

The man rolled his eyes. "Just get back to the fort. What's your company?"

"Er—" Jack consulted his memory of the conversations he'd overheard in the last few days. "D?"

The sergeant sneered. "You're drunk. Well, never mind, report back. I won't say a word if you hurry." He brandished his gun. "Well? Go!"

Jack had no desire to go to the fort. That was the last place he wanted to be. But the ill-tempered sergeant followed him until they reached the entrance, and once he was inside, there was no getting out.

It seemed absurd, with all these other uniforms around to blend in with, that he shouldn't be able to slip away. But as soon as he'd joined his company—the sergeant made sure he did—his captain seemed to be watching at every moment. Whenever he looked idle, he was given something new to do, usually something that demanded his whole attention and didn't allow him time to plan his escape.

At last he managed to break away and creep along the north-facing galleries where there was little activity, looking for a way out. Then the sound of raised voices drew him to a door near the northeast bastion.

"You foolish little brat!" came a cultured roar from inside the room. Jack crept up to it and peered through the barred window. In a cushioned seat with his wooden leg on the floor and his good leg bandaged on a stool slouched Don Blas de Lezo. His face was gray and his forehead glistened with sweat. "You'll sink us," he snarled at someone out of sight, twisting his sculpted lips. "You lost us the outer harbor defenses and you're going to lose everything else."

"Don't speak to me that way, old man!" came Eslava's higher voice, sharp and reedy. "I represent the King here, and I've decided and that's final."

"Yes, forget that it is a dangerous waste of time and it won't work!"

Jack had a sixth sense for opportunity, and there was something he could use here, he knew it,

despite having no idea what they were talking about.

"Everything from Spain for the whole year is in that customs-house." Don Blas leaned forward with obvious pain. "And you want to leave it unguarded?"

"Skillfully hidden is as good as guarded, can't you understand that? Then we can post those soldiers in the forts where we need them!"

Just like that, it came together. Jack forgot all about the danger he was in, the approaching battle that was about to sweep him up, and put his mind to planning. For five more minutes, he crouched behind the door, listening to the argument and forming ideas. Then the door opened, knocking him back into the corridor, and the gravity of his circumstances returned.

"You, soldier," said Eslava, holding out a letter. "Take this to the lieutenant-colonel, to be conveyed to the English camp at once. Hurry!"

He held the letter up to the light, but all he could make out was that it was addressed to Vernon and Wentworth. An idea occurred to him. Norrington might be with the Admiral—unlikely, but he had to try. In the guard-house, he found a lamp and rolled the wick into a makeshift pencil, then scrawled a short message on the back of the letter. He didn't dare to hope, but this situation was nothing if not funny, and Jack was counting on fate to give Norrington another reason to laugh at him.

In the end, James left Rentone out of it; he had no desire to get the young man involved in his own battle of wills with the Admiral. The reaction, however, was what he'd expected.

"How can I possibly rely on these?" said Vernon, staring at the chart as though it were a spider that had crawled onto his plate. James had to admit that it was a valid question.

"My source is reliable," James protested, feeling helpless. "You may trust these soundings as though I took them myself."

Vernon glared at him. "I'm getting tired of this secret spy of yours," he muttered. "I don't want to hear another word about it." James followed the Admiral topside, where he climbed down to his waiting barge. "And by the way, if you mention this to Wentworth, your career is over." He glared up at James. "Well? Are you coming?"

They rowed across the choppy harbor in silence while James's mind churned. He was back in favor now that there was talk of raising a battery against the city, but he was on probation, and nobody was interested in his opinion these days. Otherwise, he would have told the Admiral and the General that batteries were useless—the Army needed the support of the fleet, and ships couldn't get close enough to bombard the city or the fort without accurate soundings of the inner harbor. By refusing James's chart, Vernon was deliberately withholding his aid, and people were going to die for it.

In the camp, Wentworth's headquarters were crowded with staff officers. James heard his high, quavering voice inside: "Can someone tell me what the devil they're saying?"

James and Vernon ducked under the flap. Three civilians stood around the General's desk, gesturing and talking in Spanish all at once.

"He says they can lead the columns up to the accessible sides of the fort," said James. The men looked at him gratefully. "He says you'll need guides if you're going to attack in the dark."

The General sniffed. "Who's he to say when I'll be attacking?" There was a pause; everyone knew the attack had to come before dawn to avoid the crushing noonday heat. "Norrington," he said at last, "debrief these men, if you please."

"You are deserting, then?" James asked the three men in Spanish once they'd retired to the back of the tent. "Why have you joined us?"

"We know a lost cause when we see it," said one. "We want to be on the winning side. Maybe we'll get to keep our homes."

James didn't disabuse him of this notion. "Can you give any proof that you're being honest?"

They shrugged. "You'll just have to trust that we're dishonest blackguards who value our skins more than our country," said another.

One could always trust a dishonest man to be dishonest; James had learned and then unlearned that. But something told him these men were nothing like Sparrow.

There were shouts outside, and a man burst into the tent surrounded by soldiers. The three deserters quickly turned away; the man was a Spaniard. "From the Admiral and the Viceroy," he said, handing a letter to Wentworth.

The General took it and read it, then handed it mutely to Vernon, who read it and tossed it down. "Mere empty taunts," he said to the white-faced Wentworth, despite his own obvious anger. James took up the discarded letter—but he never read it, because a smudged and barely legible scrawl on the back caught his eye. It was Sparrow's hand, and it read: *Got pressed. Send help.*

The sergeant walked down the line of men standing at attention and thrust a shovel into Jack's hand. "Base of the east wall! Now!"

Jack stumbled with his company to the bottom of the San Lázaro fort's steep glacis, where rows of men were excavating a trench. It was clever, really—lower the ground so that the English scaling ladders couldn't clear the fort walls. Jack hadn't done any honest-to-God manual labor since he'd been a foremast hand all those years ago. He was used to running and jumping and occasionally banging around with a sword; digging ditches called for muscles he didn't have. He slid down the counterscarp into the ditch and got in line with the other men, where he bit his shovel into the ground with all the force he could and heaved the earth up onto the lip of the trench, then bit it in again. Within minutes, his back was on fire.

"You!" shouted a sergeant. "Dig faster or by God you'll be doing it with your teeth!"

Miserable, Jack thrust his shovel in deep, pressed it down with his foot, and lobbed the earth above his head. Thrust, lift, lob. There was no way out, and it was hard to stay alert to opportunity when his body was so tired. As it grew hotter and his back began to throb, his mind went to sleep. His body drove on, thrusting, lifting, lobbing. In his delirium, he imagined tunneling to the Antipodes, away from Cartagena, far from the dreary mess Norrington had involved him in. A sharp pain kept him away from thoughts of Norrington. If only he'd never laid eyes on the man.

Night fell. He staggered back up the hill to the fort with the rest of the men, sat with them for his supper of pork and biscuit, then collapsed on a pallet in the barracks. At no time was he ever out of sight of an officer, and he was too exhausted to try anything. His body hurt from head to foot, he was starving despite his meal, and something like hopelessness had begun to settle over him. He wondered if Norrington had got his note. There was nothing the man could do anyway—if he even

cared to.

His dreams were just anxious images succeeding one another: keels cutting through dark water, Don Blas's sick and drawn face, torches flaring, Norrington's green eyes full of wariness and guilt, and under it all, the endless rhythm of digging.

It was still dark when voices woke him from his shallow sleep. "Gun crews to the hill batteries!" Someone hauled him to his feet. Stupid with sleep, he followed his company out of the barracks and down the hill to where the great guns were mounted.

Jack knew how to fire a cannon, but he had not done it in some time, and his mind was still asleep. Someone put a handspike in his hand and he stared at it dumbly, then at the men who were ramming the cartridge and shot down the muzzle, and then someone was yelling at him. Jerking to life, he applied his spike the way he remembered, then leapt away as the gun captain touched off the charge. The blast rattled all sense from his head. It occurred to him as the smoke cleared, as the men hurried around sponging and worming and loading, that he'd just helped fire on the English—but Norrington hadn't come to his rescue and there was nothing he could do about it now, not if he didn't want a musket ball in his cowardly back.

The sun rose. They fought their gun in the growing heat, loading, aiming, firing, loading, aiming, firing, and Jack couldn't even get a good look at who or what he was firing at. The hill dropped off sharply below the breastwork where the guns were emplaced, and somewhere below, men were toiling up the incline, but he couldn't see them. An hour after the sun had risen, the small arms fire began, knocking down a man every so often. Shortly after that, granadoes came sailing over the crest. As he was levering the gun into position, one struck him square in the forehead and he went down, then turned his head to see it hissing not a foot from his nose. His breath halted and his bowels went cold. Then the hissing stopped.

The sun climbed the sky. More men went down under musket fire and the gun crews thinned. Soon he was ramming home the cartridges as well as plying his handspike, and he struggled to keep up the pace. The men around him were blank and sweaty. He glanced around at them periodically and wondered how he'd feel about running off and leaving them there to die. Pretty good, he concluded. But there was no way, not with the officers behind them.

There was a high-pitched shout, and Jack turned and ran without thinking a moment before the overheated gun exploded, throwing him twenty feet onto his face. He groaned where he lay, and held still. The dead were the lucky ones, and the best thing to do, at least for now, was to join their company. He shut his eyes.

Once again, there was no light. From the quarterdeck of the *Dauntless*, James could see where the dense black of the land touched the watery black of the sky, and a few orange points of light bobbed on shore in the neighborhood of the camp, but there were no stars or moon to show the way for two columns of soldiers. The fort and the city were in deepest dark, more sensed than seen, great masses cutting shapes out of the black sky.

James didn't plan on sleeping. It was two o'clock in the morning, and by now Guise's troops, all twelve hundred of them, would be parading on the beach in prelude to the assault. James didn't know Colonels Wynyard and Grant very well, but he disliked the land officers on principle, most of whom seemed too preoccupied with being gentlemen to make sure their soldiers were properly trained. The troops from the American colonies were particularly green, and with the Army decimated by disease, they made up a large portion of what was left.

He'd finally been satisfied with the deserters. They weren't intelligent enough to carry off a

deception, and their cowardly desire to be on the winning side was real enough. His experience with real spies had taught him something about the reliability of rascals, and so with a pre-dawn assault inevitable, he'd advised Wentworth to make use of them, since no better guide was available.

The lights on shore gathered together. It would be soon now. James watched them through his night-glass and waited. There was a boom and a flash of light across the water—the bomb-ketches had begun to fire, and the muzzle flashes of the mortars lit up the water. They fired for an hour, clearing the countryside between the camp and the fort, and then stopped.

James dozed against the rail. He roused when his steward jostled his elbow and handed him a cup of coffee. The sky was pale gray, and Forrest was climbing the quarterdeck stairs, looking neat and brisk. "Good morning, sir."

"Good morning, Mr. Forrest." James sipped his coffee and gestured toward the shore. "What can we make out so far?"

The gray light was still too diffuse to see much, but they could hear the guns in the fort batteries. Forrest had his spyglass out. "Looks like—Grant's column, skirting the bottom of the hill. They're making for the west entrance, but they're under fire. Looks like they've taken cover for now."

"Any sign of Wynyard's column?"

"No, sir."

James downed the rest of his coffee, took up his spyglass and trained it on the fort. Sparrow was in there, or down in the hill batteries, and James was powerless to help him. He watched the fort intently for a moment, as though he could pierce its sides to see through to Sparrow. Wynyard's column was supposed to be advancing up the broad road to the fort's east side, but he could see nothing of them.

"Sir!" said Forrest. "Look there!"

James moved his glass. A column of men had emerged from the woods on the south side of the fort—they must have lost their way in the dark—and were now struggling up the steep face where the fort could easily fire down into their midst.

"Good God," James breathed, lowering his glass.

Forrest looked stricken. "Do you think—" He stopped, but he'd certainly been about to mention the deserter guides. James swallowed. If those men had betrayed them and led Wynyard up the wrong slope, it would be on James's head.

"It's possible, Lieutenant," said James, replying to the question that hadn't been asked. "I hope it is not the case."

The sun was up now, burning through the mist and chasing off the dawn to show the battlefield on the sides of the hill. Grant's column was advancing from where they'd taken cover, and Wynyard's was being cut down. James could make out the men with the scaling ladders at the back, advancing more slowly than the grenadiers ahead. The sun was already blazing and it was only eight o'clock—a fine time for the sky to clear. Wynyard's column toiled on, moving in tiny increments up the hill as their numbers were steadily culled.

"This is madness," said James. Then he glanced at Forrest, and said nothing more.

The steward brought James and Forrest their breakfasts on deck while they watched the sun grow hotter and the black dots of the soldiers in their slow ascent. James wished Forrest would go away; he was sick with frustration and he hated having an audience for it. If Vernon had accepted those soundings, then at this very minute they could be aiding the Army and bombarding the fort. Instead, they all stood on their quarterdecks watching in impotent horror.

Yet—James couldn't entirely blame the man. He'd trusted the word of three deserters and possibly made a mistake that would cost hundreds of lives. He hadn't been able to give Vernon any great reason to trust those soundings either, and a man could only make a decision based on what he knew. Nevertheless, James knew why Vernon had refused to even look at those soundings; it had nothing to do with reasonable skepticism and everything to do with his hatred of Wentworth.

At noon, James sent a lieutenant across the water for a report. The man returned in half an hour.

"Colonel Grant is dead," he said. "His lieutenant-colonel is holding fast. Guise is ordering five hundred more men to reinforce the troops, to replace them that were used up."

"Used up?" James repeated.

The lieutenant pressed his mouth tight. "Those were the words the Brigadier used, sir."

The line of troops withdrew to expose a hillside scattered with bodies. James wondered what the Spanish losses were. Not great, since the British hadn't even reached the fort walls; only the gun crews on the hill batteries would be suffering heavily. James spared another weak hope for Sparrow.

The afternoon dragged on. Grant's column pushed to the top of the hill and struggled with their scaling ladders, but the Spanish had dug some kind of ditch, and the ladders fell short. A few men climbed them anyway and promptly fell under fire. Wynyard's column never made it to the top, slowed by the heat and the heavy fire and the steep incline. When the retreat finally came, the troops tumbled off the hill over the bodies of their comrades and melted back into the woods.

The sun set red and huge behind Boca Grande. Sparrow was out there, alive or dead. He had reached out to James for help and James had done nothing, since there was nothing he could do. Now, with night falling, he might be able to do something.

"I must go ashore," he said to Forrest.

"Sir?" Forrest looked uneasy. "Is this—is it about the deserters? I can find out if they were to blame—"

"It has nothing to do with the deserters." James gazed at Forrest's stoic face, and gathered his strength. "Mr. Forrest," he said, "listen carefully. One of my spies was caught up in the battle this afternoon, and I owe it to him to go and look for him. You must pledge me your confidence."

"You have it, sir." Forrest's grave look faltered. "But might I recommend changing out of your uniform? You're liable to get shot."

James smiled. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

He had no plan. Once ashore, he made as if for the General's tent, then veered toward the camp's edge. Wentworth, in his usual zeal for Army regulations, had posted a dozen sentries around the perimeter, and James didn't have Sparrow's talent for lying his way through. He crept through the reeds in mud up to his ankles, staying low, following the little creeks. At one point, he turned to see the profile of a man and a musket against the sky, and his foot made a loud splash that turned the

sentry's head. He held still, trying to breathe silently, until the man looked away.

At last, he cleared the outer perimeter and struck out into the dark countryside. It was difficult hiking, marshy and veined with creeks he often didn't see before sinking in to his knees, but eventually he reached wooded ground and the road that ran under the fort. He began to come across the leavings of a retreating Army: guns, canteens, cartridge boxes, and the occasional body. He tried not to look as he passed, tried not to think about how he'd fixed his cares on one little life when so many others had been lost. He swallowed the guilt that always hung about his thoughts of Sparrow, and walked on.

At last he reached the base of the hill of San Lázaro. There were no sentries—everyone was shut up in the fort, it seemed. On the hill, bodies were everywhere. If Sparrow was dead in the fort, James would never know, but he had to look, and this was the only place he *could* look. He picked his way among the bodies, scanning faces, listening for breathing.

He wondered what he'd been expecting—to trip across Sparrow lying there? For the man to jump up and identify himself? The folly of what he was doing overtook him, and he stumbled over the rocky dirt, desolate, his unlit lantern scraping the ground.

Beneath the white stone of the fort stood the earthen parapets of the hill batteries. In the cloud-obscured moonlight, James could make out the black mouths of the gun muzzles. If there were any Spanish dead to be found outside, they would be there. James climbed toward them.

He clambered over the crest of the nearest one, and staggered back in horror, gorge rising. A gun had exploded, blowing her crew to pieces, all of which lay around the platform in a congealed swamp of blood. A few more bodies lay further off. James made his way to them and rolled one over with his foot. The man had been shot in the eye; the other eye stared ahead. He left the body for another one, which appeared to have been thrown by the blast of the gun. Blood pooled under it from a hundred wounds made by shards of flying metal. James rolled him over too, holding his breath. Not Sparrow. Then he heard a groan.

What could he do? He couldn't help a wounded Spaniard now. Dragging the man back across the creeks to camp would be impossible, and he couldn't very well knock on the fort's door. He made his way to the body that had groaned and rolled him over. Sparrow blinked up at him.

Relief crashed through him, then terror. "Sparrow, where are you injured?"

Sparrow coughed. "Must've gone to sleep. All that swabbing an' loading an' firing an' swabbing an' loading an' bloody hell it never ends."

"Oh, Sparrow, you fool," James breathed, sinking to his knees, "you utter idiot. How did this happen?"

"Disguise gone wrong." Sparrow sat up, and went into James's arms without resistance. James pushed his heavy hair out of the way and kissed his neck while Sparrow lay like a sack in his embrace, arms hanging at his sides, forehead propped on James's shoulder.

"We should move," he murmured into Sparrow's hair. "Can you move?"

"If you give me a hand." Sparrow lifted his head, eyes bleary. "Where we goin'?"

"I don't know. Somewhere sheltered and outside the perimeter, since I can't very well sneak you into camp."

They staggered and skidded to the bottom of the hill and then to the edge of the trees, where James

propped Sparrow against a log, then left him to return to camp. Among the tents, nobody looked at him—sick, wounded, dying men lay everywhere, groaning for help, and James squeezed his eyes shut as he passed them. When he returned to Sparrow an hour later, his stomach was churning from the smell of blood and the ache of his conscience. Again he felt the irrationality of putting Sparrow's life above the others, yet he could not regret it.

Sparrow was dozing against the log. James shook his shoulder gently and he shot up with a grunt. "Oh, it's you," he said, and settled again.

James unpacked a sack. "Here—blanket, bandages, water, biscuit and salt pork."

"Glad to see military cuisine crosses all nationalities." Sparrow snatched the canteen and came up for air a minute later. "So, Commodore, trust me now?"

"I always trusted you. I just—" James sighed and bent to kiss Sparrow's shoulder. "I was afraid, I suppose." He looked up and glared. "Is that so strange?"

"I guess not." Sparrow grinned fuzzily. "I like this new Commodore. This touchy kissy fellow."

James scowled. "You always like me better when I'm making a fool of myself."

"Aye, since it usually benefits me."

James sat down beside him. "It's just that I've become—more aware of the passage of time, of late."

"What, life is precious, that sort of thing?"

"I simply found that I have a habit of putting things off. What I thought was prudence was really cowardice. I sat at the bedside of my dying friend, thinking of all the things I ought to have told him..."

"Well, we're not dead." Sparrow sat up. "We've got time. We're shiverin' in the dew on the edge of a battlefield, but I've stolen a moment in worse situations."

James laughed, which became a gasp. "It's the damndest thing," he said. "This has been an unending nightmare. I've lost things I can never replace and I've failed good men and I've seen things I shall never purge from my mind no matter how hard I try. Yet at the moment, I am—happy."

"Aye," said Sparrow sonorously. "Me too, I reckon. Though I'd be happier if the seat of me breeches weren't soaked through."

"Then sit on the blanket, you idiot."

They spread the blanket between the roots of a tree, and James struck a flint and lit the lantern. In the light, Sparrow's injuries were apparent: scrapes, powder burns, and a deep scoring cut at his hairline.

James mopped the blood carefully from Sparrow's brow. "You scared the hell out of me," he admitted.

"You? I scared the hell out of *me*. Dunno how you talked me into joinin' the Spanish army."

"I didn't!"

"Jus' kidding. Jesus, learn to laugh a little." And with that, Sparrow fell asleep.

Sometime after midnight, James awoke to Sparrow shaking him. They fucked frantically, leaving bruises, too eager to be tender. Afterward, they lay side by side, still not talking, staring at the sky between the branches and catching their breath.

As their sweat cooled, James said, "I suppose this is it."

"What is?"

"For us. Were one of us a woman and neither of us criminals, we could at least do this under a roof."

Sparrow laughed hoarsely. "You get used to it."

"Do you engage in these sorts of liaisons often?"

"Never tried it with someone like you," Sparrow shrugged. "Just with fellows outside the law."

"How much easier that must be."

"Aye, well, life outside the law ain't exactly easy."

"True."

They lay in silence for a while longer. At some point, James let his hand wander into Sparrow's.

Forrest had the watch when James came aboard. He simply said, "Did all go well, sir?"

"It did." James gave him a nod and went below for an hour of sleep.

When James came back on deck, Forrest said, "The General and the Admiral are both calling for councils of war. Wentworth is convening his people ashore, and principle sea officers are repairing aboard the flag."

"That doesn't include me, I suppose," said James. He wasn't surprised; he knew perfectly well that he wasn't back in Vernon's good graces, and he doubted he ever would be. "Tell the officer of the watch to keep me informed, Lieutenant."

The report came in two hours later. The Army had declared itself unable to continue without support from the fleet, and the fleet had declared such support unnecessary. The General and the Admiral weren't speaking to each other. Furthermore, the Army's water was failing and over two-thirds of the troops were sick, including a number of the principle officers.

"This must end," James muttered once the lieutenant reporting had left him. But there was no one to say it to.

That night, he went ashore. At the creek bed, he found Sparrow returned to his former piratical aspect, no army uniform in sight. "I took a walk," he said. "Pretty scenery around here."

"You could have been caught." James sat down beside him.

Sparrow accepted his dinner, a pudding from James's own table, and in exchange he passed James a bottle. "Dutch courage?"

"Where on Earth did you get that? And no, thank you."

Sparrow kept it and swigged between bites of pudding. "What's so Dutch about courage, anyway?" he asked, leaning back.

"I think that's the point," said James.

"Why not French courage, then? They're drunk enough. Or Russian courage? You want to meet an entire nation of drunkards, go no further."

James shook his head. "How are you feeling?"

"Marvelous. Ready to get back to work. Has the General given up yet, or is there still a chance of takin' this pile?"

"I don't know, to be honest. I suspect he's ready to withdraw, but I doubt that Vernon will let him. He'll shame him into spending his last man."

"Well, then, our task has changed."

James frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean we must now think up a way to make them quit so we can all get out of here."

"That would be wonderful—if I had any credit left with the Admiral."

"Who says we'll need it?"

"I take it you have an idea."

"Not yet. Give me time."

They sat quietly for a while, leaning against each other. Incrementally, James let his body relax and fit itself to Sparrow's. Everything was chaos and he didn't know what to do, so he just concentrated on the warmth of Sparrow's body and the slow lift and fall of his breathing. Gently, he set his anxieties aside—not to forget, but to lose track of for a while. Sparrow shifted, and then hands were carefully pulling off James's hat, and pushing off his coat, and laying him back. He lost orientation as the sky swung up above him, and then Sparrow's warm weight pressed him to the earth.

It was so strange. He didn't hesitate to name what he'd felt for Elizabeth, even for Beauclerk; it was so obviously love. He had no name for this thing with Sparrow—messy, confusing, generously mixed with frustration, but infinitely more exciting than those hopeless longings. This was out in the world, between them, a living thing. A runtish, unattractive thing, perhaps. Sparrow was more fascinating than beautiful. Even now, there was a tendril of underworld smoke about him, with his lacquer-drop eyes smeared black like a houri's, and the mammonish glitter of his smile. One thought of the dull gleam of gems in the earth when one looked at him.

In the morning, the flagship signaled to the *Dauntless*.

"I need you at the general council of war, unfortunately," said Vernon once James had come aboard. "Wentworth will attempt to hide behind his precious regulations, and I must know whether the engineers are feeding us hogwash. Think you can manage it?"

James bowed, hiding his sneer.

The officers convened in Vernon's stateroom. All of the land officers looked pale and ill, and Wentworth had aged ten years. As foolish as they were, James felt sorry for them. Disease had not struck the fleet nearly so hard as it had the Army, who'd spent their nights on swampy ground without their tents and their days toiling under blistering sun.

"We cannot make another assault without support," said Wentworth, unable to meet the Admiral's eyes. "We need at least fifteen hundred more men, and it's clear now that the fort cannot be carried without a breach, and thus we must raise a battery—"

"We'll have no more talk of batteries," growled Vernon. "You've led us down that garden path once already."

Wentworth opened his mouth, then closed it. "Nevertheless, we need more troops, more supplies, more *help*, Admiral. Your ships could bombard the fort, for one."

"How many times must I tell you?" Vernon shouted. "The water is too shallow for us to move our ships into position!" He sent a quelling glare at James. "We have our own rules and regulations, you know, and I will not risk my fleet on unnecessary shows of strength."

"Not even when we are risking our very lives just by remaining here?" Wentworth seemed to grow, his back straightening. "Just because you lost your blasted treasure fleet and now you hope to save face by standing on our shoulders? This is cowardice, Admiral—"

Vernon rose abruptly, pushed out his chair, and stormed out of the cabin.

Everyone sat in the following silence, listening to the mad call of the gulls outside the window. Then Rear-Admiral Ogle spoke. "I don't know where you expect those fifteen hundred men to come from, General, or where you'll find the time to raise another battery if we can expect it to take as long as the last time."

To Wentworth's left, Armstrong looked offended, but Wentworth spoke first. "Then we must re-embark the troops and leave this place," he said, sounding more assured than he ever had. "I cannot take that fort with what I have now. It's impossible."

Vernon stormed back in. "Nothing is *impossible*," he snarled, taking his seat again. "You'll do your duty, Wentworth, or I'll see you hanged for it."

Wentworth stared in bafflement, no longer angry or afraid but simply stunned. "Very well," he whispered. "May it be on your head."

The treasure fleet. Wentworth was right—it had always been about that damned treasure. James remembered the Admiral hungrily dividing up the future spoils from Cartagena as though that were the only part of this miserable expedition that mattered. When he went ashore that night, he said as much to Sparrow.

Sparrow smiled thoughtfully. "It's funny you should say so."

James raised a brow. "You have an idea."

"I have an idea," Sparrow agreed. "But I'll need Don Pedro."

James blinked. "How do you know about Don Pedro?"

"Please—give me some credit."

James blinked again. "Well, anyway. What are you going to do with him?"

"Allow me to start from the beginning. You see, while enlisted in the Spanish army, I overheard a conversation. The Viceroy, who's young an' fancies himself clever, an' the Admiral, who's old enough to be his father, have been giving Vernon and Wentworth a run for their money. Their most recent row contained some interesting information."

Sparrow paused, enchanted by his own storytelling. James nodded impatiently. "And?"

"Eslava had a brilliant idea: to protect the goods in the customs-house, all those wonderful riches from the treasure galleons, he proposed they move it all in the middle of the night to a secret location. They'd continue to treat the old place as though the swag were still there, an' only post a light guard on the new place so as not to draw attention." Sparrow shrugged. "Naturally, the old man thought this was idiotic. Nothin' stays secret in a besieged town, especially when there's men like me all over the place. But Eslava insisted an' he's the boss, so they did it."

James's eyes glittered. "So all the treasure for the year is sitting in a lightly guarded house somewhere."

"Exactly. 'Twould be no great trick to make off with some an' deliver it into the hands of the Army, thus assuaging your Admiral's lust for gold an' leavin' him free to call off this whole mad affair."

He wondered if it was merely exhaustion that made this seem like a brilliant idea, but he didn't have a better one, and it was possible that the Admiral, ruled by his pride, would relent if he could do so without losing face. He nodded. "Fine, fine. But how is Don Pedro going to help?"

"Leverage, mate."

Norrington shook his head. "We already tried that. Don Blas wouldn't even turn over a couple of South Sea factors to get him back."

"I could convince 'em he knows things. An' if he's fond of his hide, which I think he is, he won't argue."

"So where is this secret location?"

"Somewhere close to the Puente Heredia. The road over that bridge runs right under the fort on its way out of town. Dangerous, to be sure, so I'll be needin' a hostage."

"He could expose us both, you know. Don't you think Vernon is going to start noticing that prisoners under my protection keep going missing?"

"Do you want that loot or not?"

James sighed. "Just keep him alive. The man is in my care, and my conscience has already been taxed to its limit." He paused. "Keep yourself alive, too. Now, tell me what my part in all this will be."

"You can find a way to keep those bomb-ketches from firing on the road once I get the goods out of town, an' make sure the Army is in the right place at the right time."

"But how can I do that, short of telling them what's happening?"

"Dunno. Do I have to do all the work around here?"

"Very well." He shook his head, reminding himself that this was the sort of madness at which Sparrow excelled. "This had better work. I'm not sure I can save you a third time."

"Up you go," barked Jack in Spanish, digging the pistol into Don Pedro's hunched spine.

"It's slimy," Don Pedro moaned.

"And you'll soon be a slimy spot on these rocks if you don't hurry up."

The man sighed and crawled gingerly into the culvert. He made a sound of disgust as his hands and knees sank into the wet sucking floor. "You English are apes," he said as he dragged himself forward along the narrow tunnel.

"I resent that," said Jack. His smaller frame allowed him to walk bent over, sparing his hands and knees. "My dad was Irish. And I'll have you know I was baptized in the Roman Catholic Church, same as you." He smirked. "Didn't exactly stick, though, did it? Wonder if I could do it again, like laying on another coat of paint..."

"Don't you ever shut up?" growled the man.

"It's part of my plan to keep you off-balance."

Don Pedro shook his head. "You're the most incompetent pirate I've ever met."

"I wouldn't judge so soon." He poked Don Pedro in the arse with the pistol. "Just because I've plenty of good cheer doesn't mean I'm not a cold-blooded killer."

He stuck close to Don Pedro as they made their way through the streets, keeping the muzzle of the pistol pressed tightly into his prisoner's side. He didn't expect heroics, but stupidity was a force of nature. Eventually they found the address in La Matuna that Don Blas and Eslava had spoken of—a livery stable before its conversion to a customs-house. Night had fallen, and Jack paused to listen. There was cannon fire in the distance, but there always was these days, and he couldn't tell whether Norrington had succeeded.

"Tell them to open up," he said, giving Don Pedro a push.

Don Pedro glared at him. "Who says they'll listen?"

"Just take a stab, will you? Remember, slimy spot."

"You, there!" Don Pedro called weakly. "Open up!"

There was no answer. Don Pedro turned to give Jack a smug look and Jack poked him with the pistol. "Oh no," he smiled, "you're not off the hook."

Don Pedro stiffened and turned back to face the stable. He was not the bravest man Jack had ever held at the end of a pistol, that was for sure. "It's Don Pedro Elizagaray!" he shouted. "Open up or I'll have you horsewhipped, you fucking idiots!"

Jack gave Don Pedro an approving nod.

A window in the loft flew open, and a man leaned out with a musket. "Captain Elizagaray? Of the *Fuerte*?"

"No, of your mother! Yes, of the *Fuerte*, goddamn you! Are you going to open the door or am I

going to have to climb up there to shove that gun up your arse?"

"Sorry, Captain!" The man slammed the window. A moment later, the door opened.

Jack kicked Don Pedro inside, pulled the door shut and stuck the pistol under his prisoner's jaw. "Here's how this is going to work, gentlemen," he said with a gracious smile.

After explaining to the men that they were being robbed, and that they would shortly be procuring him a horse and cart to aid in same, they stood frowning. "Well?" he said. "Do you want this fellow's brains splattered everywhere, or are you going to hop to it?"

"Meaning no disrespect, Captain Elizagaray," said one of the men timidly, "but the Admiral told us to guard these goods with our lives, and our duty—your duty—"

"What he means," said another guard, "is that the goods are worth more than you are."

Don Pedro turned bright red, looking frantically from Jack to the guard. "This is outrageous—my family is one of the most powerful in Navarre—the Viceroy will have you all shot—"

On the inside, Jack was worrying, but on the outside, he nodded coolly and pressed the gun harder into Don Pedro's neck. "I can see how you fellows might think that," he said. "But consider something else: this man knows English state secrets. Deliver him unharmed, and with such a windfall of intelligence, the Admiral will barely notice a few things missing."

The men looked at each other.

"For God's sake!" cried Don Pedro.

"What kinds of secrets?" asked the skeptical guard, crossing his arms.

"Well..." Jack turned to Don Pedro. "Tell them something you know, Captain."

"Er—" He gave Jack a look of humiliated desperation. "The English plan to attack Havana next!"

"They do?" Jack raised his eyebrows, then cleared his throat. "I mean, there you are, gentlemen. There's more where that came from. Tell the Admiral you lost a bit of loot rescuing him from English dogs, and you'll receive a commendation, not a court-martial. Don Pedro here won't tattle on you, will he?"

"Of course not," said Don Pedro quickly.

The guards looked at each other, then at Don Pedro, faces puzzled.

"Forget the Admiral," Don Pedro growled. "My family will make sure you're all drawn and quartered and buried in the four corners of Spain!"

At last, they sprang to life.

"I'll need that cart," said Jack, pointing with his free hand. "And a team of horses hitched up. Go on, and no funny stuff, remember. You!" He gestured to the stupider guard. "Find me the silver."

"Silver?" said the man nervously.

"It's a white, glossy sort of metal, comes in bars or coins."

"There's—er—no silver, sir."

Jack grinned. "You're a terrible liar. Go find it. Oh, and grab a few barrels of that Jesuit's bark while you're at it."

The man turned and hurried off.

Jack hadn't actually known if there was silver. Usually Peru sent their silver by ship to Panama, not overland to Cartagena—but silver was the only thing that might satisfy Vernon and Wentworth enough to make them give up and go home.

Ten minutes later, a cart stood hitched to four horses while the men loaded it up with sacks. One of them tore open and pieces of eight dribbled out.

"You fool!" cried the cleverer guard. "Do you think Don Blas will forgive us the silver?"

Jack leaned back on a hogshead. "Tell him whatever you like—tell him there were forty Englishmen. Don Pedro won't say a word." He tapped Don Pedro's temple with the pistol. "Just think of all the secrets in this head."

As the men loaded the silver, Don Pedro gave Jack an unpleasant smile. "You even sing like a sparrow," he said. "Lowther told me all about you, you inbred little vermin."

Jack frowned, studying Don Pedro's oily face. Lowther? "Oh," he said softly. Norrington was going to have a fit. "So *el paisano* was not one man but two."

"I'm surprised it took you so long to figure it out," said Don Pedro. "You were supposed to be clever, in a savage sort of way."

"If you were clever, you'd keep supplying me with reasons not to kill you," Jack snapped, troubled and wounded. How had he managed such a colossal oversight? *Lowther*, of all people.

Once the cart was at capacity, he backed the guards into a corner and made Don Pedro bind them up, then gag them with their neckcloths. Then he bound and gagged Don Pedro, and forced him under the tarpaulin they'd stretched over the cart bed.

"It's been a pleasure," said Jack as he opened the stable door, then sprang into his seat, slapped the reins on his team, and struck out into the night.

He drove slowly through the empty streets. The houses were dark, their windows boarded, and only soldiers roamed the streets. Each time one appeared, Jack tensed, expecting to be stopped, but then they would stagger and stumble against a wall, and Jack would realize they were not on duty.

He had approximately ten minutes to figure out how he was going to get past the gate. For the first time, the night was silent—no cannon fire. Norrington had come through. Maybe the guards at the gate would allow a humble farmer to use this window of cease-fire to return to his home in the countryside.

He approached the Puente Heredia at a walk; the cart was overloaded and he didn't want to find out how badly. Wheels grinding over the stones, his cart passed under the great arch of the fortification that defended the bridge—a half-moon barbican flanked by two bastions full of soldiers—and drew up his team when an infantry captain stepped out of the shadows.

"No one leaves the city!" the man shouted. "The Viceroy's orders!"

"But I must return to my home," said Jack, stalling. So far his luck wasn't presenting him with any opportunities. "My wife is ill, my children hungry, my farm overrun with—with gophers—" He

wincing.

"Gophers?" The man stepped closer, raising his lantern so he could make out Jack's face. "What is your name?"

"Captain," he said, "it's unlikely the ships will hold their fire for long. Please, I must—"

"Mmph!"

Jack and the captain froze. They had both heard the noise from under the tarpaulin.

"What was that?" The captain took a step toward the bed of the cart.

Jack sat on his hand to keep from grabbing him. "Nothing!" he said. "Just—a sheep."

"A sheep?" The man seized the tarpaulin to draw it back and Jack's hand shot out to stop him.

"Careful! It's been sick, you see, and it's sensitive to the light."

"What the—" The man turned to him, furious. "Get down this instant."

"I'd rather not," said Jack, drawing a deep breath in preparation for what he was about to do.

"You'll do as I say!" shouted the man, climbing up on the cart to grab Jack's arm. In a flash, Jack had shoved the man down onto the stones with his boot and slapped the reins on his team's backs with as much force as he could. The cart lunged toward the gate.

"Stop him!" shouted the captain, and a few soldiers moved to intercept. He fired his pistol ahead, which made the soldiers fall back and the horses leap forward in terror. Then he was through the gate and barreling across the Puente Heredia at a hard gallop.

Musket fire broke out behind him, but he couldn't look back; he had to focus on steering the horses down the narrow strip between two dark lagoons. After another minute came the boom of a cannon and the lagoon on his right erupted in a column of water. When he made the mainland, San Lázaro loomed on his left, but the fort wasn't aware of him. All he had to do was reach the countryside, then abandon his cart where the English could find it.

Hoofbeats grew louder behind him. He could feel the cart's back wheel begin to wobble, but there was nothing for it except to drive on. A spatter of musket shot tore overhead and he shrank into his seat as far as he could and still see above his horses' heads. Don Pedro under the tarpaulin was making a muffled racket through his gag, and Jack wanted nothing more than to throw him under the cart's wheels. If only he hadn't promised Norrington he'd keep the man alive.

He allowed himself a look over his shoulder, and saw five horses bearing down. Their riders couldn't reload their guns, but they had cutlasses and they were gaining on him. Jack turned back to his horses. There was no quick way to cut them free and abandon the cart.

Suddenly there were shots ahead. Behind him came a thump; one of the riders had gone down. Either the men in front of him were terrible shots or they were English. His chest eased a little. He just had to get closer.

More fire was exchanged. He drove toward the source, keeping his head down, wishing and hoping, until he saw a company of men climb out of the brush ahead. This was it—he dove from the cart into the marsh on the side of the road. He lay still for a moment, winded, then crawled behind a bush. The Spanish horsemen had turned around, and the English soldiers had come up to

surround the cart. They hadn't seen him. He got to his feet and ran for the woods.

"You! Stop!"

He ran until a musket ball tore past his head. He stopped.

In which all comes to a crisis

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It had been no simple task to sneak his irritating prisoner ashore, but James had an even worse time silencing the bomb-ketches. Briefly, he'd considered being honest—simply admitting that he had a man on the inside who would shortly be liberating a great deal of Spanish wealth and that they had best be ready to collect it. But he had turned into a secretive, paranoid creature, and he'd forgotten how to be any other way. There were two James Norringtons now—the one who served His Majesty, and the one who screwed and schemed with Jack Sparrow. It was complicated, having two people in one body.

The Admiral was in camp, where James hoped he wouldn't notice the silence of the guns while he was having his fun with Wentworth. James went ashore. He passed Wentworth's tent and heard raised voices, then sought out Armstrong, who was with his sub-engineers playing piquet.

"Deal you in, Captain?" asked Armstrong, getting to his feet. James wasn't sure how he'd managed to incur Armstrong's awe—the man was old enough to be his father.

"Perhaps the next hand," said James.

"Sir," said one of the sub-engineers, "is it true the Admiral's sitting on soundings for the inner harbor?"

"Shut your mouth!" Armstrong barked. "He doesn't know what he's saying, Captain Norrington."

"The Admiral is doing all he can to support the Army," James replied slowly. "I am quite confident of that."

He let them deal him in, lost spectacularly, and wandered away. A little after two in the morning, there was a commotion on the edge of camp. He followed the stream of men to discover the source, hoping to find a pack of triumphant men with a cart, but something was wrong. A sergeant came toward him and he stopped the man.

"They've caught a pirate, sir," the sergeant explained. "He was making off with our prize, and he set free one of our prisoners."

James shut his eyes and drew a shuddering breath. He pushed through the crowd to see four soldiers marching Sparrow through the alleys between tents toward the General's headquarters.

"*Ustedes me tienen equivocado con algun otro tipo*," Sparrow was protesting as he struggled in their ungentle grip. "*¡Quitame las manos de encima, hijos de puta!*"

His squirming and complaining had little force; Sparrow knew he was on his beam-ends. James followed him into Wentworth's tent, where the General and the Admiral stopped their arguing to take in the spectacle of the protesting pirate.

"We caught him with a cartload of Spanish silver," said one of the soldiers holding him. "He says he's Spanish—or at least that's all he'll talk—but he looks like a pirate to us, sir."

Out of nowhere, Lowther appeared. "Admiral, sir," he said in his obsequious whine, "I know 'im. He's Jack Sparrow."

Sparrow made no attempt to argue, shrugging and giving a weak smile. "Hang him," said Vernon.

Now that the worst had happened, James was surprised that he didn't feel more. The pain when he'd thought Sparrow lost in battle had been far greater. Calm settled on him now. His very body seemed to grow colder, and his mind hardened into glass. So Sparrow had been captured, and the game was up. What now? his mind inquired coolly. Before he was even aware of it, he had made a decision.

"Admiral," he said, stepping forward, "do not hang this man. He is working for me."

Jack waited, furtively rubbing the skin under his manacles, while a familiar scene played out. The scene had never included Norrington in the role of his protector before, which made it interesting. Of course, Norrington had botched everything by admitting their connection. Some men had no head for this sort of thing.

"He is my spy, and he was attempting to steal those goods so that they would fall into our hands," Norrington blundered on. "He is working for England."

"If he's working for you, I don't see how either of you could possibly be working for England," growled Vernon. The man really was a pig, but Jack couldn't blame him for being suspicious. He knew exactly how this looked.

"Sir, this man has supplied intelligence that aided in the capture of Spanish ships, and his survey of the estuary helped us take the town of Chagres."

Not good, not good! Jack tried to get Norrington's attention, craning his neck and shaking his head vigorously, anything to keep him away from the subject of Chagres.

Vernon narrowed his eyes. "If I recall correctly, Lieutenant Lowther supplied us with the critical intelligence there."

Norrington hadn't seen Jack. "Intelligence he got from Sparrow! Ask him—Mr. Lowther, did Sparrow not give those soundings to you?"

"Sure," shrugged Lowther with an unpleasant grin. "I stole 'em from him, his bein' such a great friend to the Spanish an' all."

Only after he'd put the question to Lowther did James see Sparrow's frantic head-wagging, and he knew he'd made a fatal mistake. Of course Lowther wasn't going to reveal the ruse that had got him pardoned and insinuated into the Royal Navy. He thought suddenly of the marks on the lock of his desk drawer. "Someone close to Vernon," Sparrow had said. His stomach dropped to the floor. Of all the bad luck.

"You can confirm that this pirate is a Spanish spy?" Vernon was asking Lowther, who nodded and grinned. James half-expected him to loll his tongue out like a spaniel. "Very well—take him into custody, and Captain Norrington as well, on suspicion of—"

"Sir," James pleaded, "this man is lying. He himself is the spy. Please trust me—Sparrow helped us storm the Barradera, and he has sounded the inner harbor, although you refuse to—"

"What?" Wentworth got to his feet. "You told me no one had sounded that harbor, Admiral! You said—"

"Quiet." Vernon waved him away like a child that had spoken up. "I told you to forget about those soundings, Norrington."

Anger gripped James from head to toe. He was talking before he knew it. "It was our duty to support the Army, sir," he snarled, "our duty, and yet you ignored the information I gave you, didn't even look at it when you knew perfectly well—"

"I ignored those soundings because I recognized them for what they were," said Vernon: "false intelligence. And you," he went on, voice rising, "were the supplier of that intelligence. I believe that's treason."

These words should have struck him like a thunderbolt, and yet he kept talking. "So I'm to be accused of treason now?" He laughed shrilly. "To be sacrificed so that you may justify yourself, so that you may cover up your *own* tr—"

"Complete that sentence," said Vernon with deadly calm, "and I'll string you from the yardarm."

The words got through at last, and James clenched his teeth, his vision blurry with anger. He stared at the Admiral's crimson face and felt sick with mortification. Sparrow would never have lost his head like this.

"Admiral," said Wentworth, "is this true? Did you disregard this intelligence that could have put the lie to all your protestations?"

"As you might realize if you thought about it for a single moment," Vernon replied, "one can only learn if a chart is accurate by sailing the waters oneself, thereby putting one's ships at risk—"

"Risk? *Risk*?" Wentworth's pale lips trembled. "Two thirds of my troops are dead, Admiral! And you won't risk a ship or two to—"

"Very well," said Vernon. "Since you and Captain Norrington are so determined to put His Majesty's fleet in harm's way for the sake of verifying a bit of pernicious intelligence, we shall do exactly that. Norrington, you are hereby relieved of your command of the *Dauntless* and posted to the *Galicia*, with which you will bombard the city walls using those soundings you have such faith in. If this test is a failure, you shall stand accused of spying, along with your pirate friend. Is that clear?"

James nodded, feeling dizzy. "Aye, sir."

The hope James had allowed himself did not survive. In his cramped prison in the *Princess Caroline*'s forepeak, he listened to his friends' reports. The *Galicia* was to be converted to a floating battery so that she could withstand heavy fire from the city and the fort; the Army was shipping their thirty-two-pounders, and the fleet's carpenters were reinforcing her and loading her down with sandbags until she sank nearly up to her lower gun-ports. Her draught was now so deep that she would not be able to pass over any of the inshore reefs, whether Sparrow's soundings were correct or not.

The outfitting of the ship took three days. James spent them sitting, pacing and occasionally sleeping in the tiny space. He spent a great deal of time worrying about Sparrow.

On the first day, Gillette visited him.

"Before anything, sir, let me just say that I believe you." Gillette's face was forbidding despite his words. "I have no idea what could have driven you to strike up with Sparrow, but I'm sure you had

your reasons."

"Thank you." James knew when he was being patronized. "Where is Sparrow? Is he alive?"

"They have him on Ogle's flag under guard. I suspect they won't hang him as long as they think they can use him against you, so don't worry."

"Oh, no." James rolled his eyes. "Why would I worry?" He sat on the stool they'd furnished his cabin with. "Have you seen Vernon at all? Is he determined to prove me a traitor?"

"He's determined to prove that his guns couldn't have reached San Lázaro. Everyone knows those soundings exist now—but if you're a traitor, then they go away."

He frowned. "Please, as a favor, keep track of Sparrow. Don't let them bundle him overboard in a sack in the middle of the night."

"I'll do my best, sir."

Later, Forrest ducked into the cabin and sat down across from him. "You shall be in need of lieutenants aboard the *Galicia*," he said with his usual plainness. "Allow me to volunteer myself."

"That ship will draw the fire of every gun in the city, Mr. Forrest, and there will be no glory in it. Think clearly before you—"

"I have, sir. All of the men are volunteers. I shall be among them, one way or the other."

James swallowed the lump in his throat. "Very well."

On the third day, Rentone paid a visit.

"What I don't understand," he said, looking wretched, "is that you said you weren't sure you could trust that chart."

"Briefly I doubted the honesty of its source, yes," James admitted, "but my faith was restored."

"That's just it!" Rentone sighed. "To think it came from the very pirate in Portobello that the Admiral ordered shot on sight—I simply can't fathom—"

"I know it looks poor," James pleaded, "but consider what is happening. The Admiral has failed and is making a scapegoat of me, can't you see?"

"I just—don't believe Admiral Vernon would do such a thing."

"I know you worship the man for giving you a career, but I promise you," James cried, "he is not the sainted hero you think he is!"

"I want to say I understand what you did, sir," said Rentone miserably, "but—"

James sighed. "It's all right. You must do as your conscience tells you. I did as mine told me, no matter how it must look."

Rentone shook his head with a look of such disappointment James felt a twinge in his chest. "I do hope so, sir."

In the early morning of the fourth day, he was led up on deck into the brilliant sun. For a moment he stood blinking and shielding his eyes, and then Vernon's voice said, "Your barge awaits,

Captain."

James watched from his boat as the grand *Galicia* loomed closer. She was indeed riding as low in the water as she possibly could—her draught would be at least six fathoms. His only choice would be to warp her through the narrow channel into the lagoon, if even that were possible.

On deck, he found the mood somewhat different. His officers saluted smartly and with pride, and his first lieutenant shook his hand. He answered the salutes gravely, then turned to Forrest. "Let us go below," he said, drawing Sparrow's chart from his coat, "and decide our approach. All hands up anchor!"

The *Galicia* sailed so badly that James didn't dare bring her about. They wallowed toward the lagoon's narrow entrance on the starboard tack, their leadsman in the forechains to warn them off the shallows, and their anchor a-cockbill, ready to be dropped at a second's notice.

As the city grew larger off the bow, the leadsman called out depths of nine fathoms, and James allowed himself some confidence—the wind was steady from the east, and if he kept close enough to the shore, he might avoid the reefs. He could see the breakers on them now, right where Sparrow said they would be. The tide was nearly in, and there might be enough water to float them through.

At nine o'clock, San Lázaro began to fire. It was still too soon to return fire, and James dreaded what would happen when they did. The carpenters had knocked the rear trucks off the gun carriages so that the guns could be elevated high enough, but the deck would absorb all the recoil, wrenching the ship's frame. She could fall apart the moment they were done with her; she was as expendable as her captain. He just hoped she would wait that long

As the soundings grew shallower, James ordered sails taken in and the kedge anchor rowed out so they could warp the ship through the mouth of the channel.

"Sparrow's chart gives six fathoms, sir," said Forrest, watching the boat bearing the anchor. "The ship draws six fathoms easily."

"I know, Mr. Forrest," James said. "But this is what has been asked of us. I see no other choice, do you?"

"The tide is mostly in," Forrest nodded. Together, they colluded in false hope.

At ten o'clock, there was a great rending crunch that threw everyone forward.

"Keep towing!" James shouted. "Send out the boats. We must drag her through."

The capstan ground away, pawls clanking with each stamp of the men, and the boats pulled hard on their tow lines. The ship inched forward. She was now close enough to the fort to receive its fire, and one shot shattered a boat and sent her crew to the bottom. The rest of the boats strained, pulling along with the capstan while the ship lurched forward with sickening crunches.

"Set topsails!" cried James, and the ship leaned yearningly toward the lagoon and scraped more loudly. By eleven, a gravelly whoosh sent them afloat again.

"Six feet in the well," the carpenter reported. "Don't know what she'll do once we start firing, let alone taking shots to the hull."

"Do your best," James sighed.

As soon as she entered the lagoon, the fort's fire began to batter her. A thirty-two-pound shot promptly demolished the main topmast and sent deadly splinters down. But now they were in range to begin their own assault. The heavy guns on the main deck fired in sequence from aft to fore—James didn't want to find out what would happen if he fired a simultaneous broadside—and all of the shots went home on the fort. Then several shots struck the hull one after the other, biting through the timber reinforcements the carpenters had installed. The ship shuddered.

They sailed under topsails until they were close enough to reach the city walls, then dropped anchor. The fire from the fort, and now from the city, was growing hotter. James stayed on the quarterdeck and watched as the side of his ship was destroyed one shot at a time—within two hours, three guns were dismantled and most of the gun crews had fallen and been replaced. The lower decks were firing on the city, but through his spyglass, he could see they were doing very little good.

Hours ground by, and James struggled to keep from slipping into hopelessness. The decks grew bloody, and at last, he went down to join the thinning gun crews. Aiming, training, touching off, pushing bodies aside, helping the wounded below—he was used to the rhythm of battle, but never one so futile.

Around three o'clock, he heard someone shout, "Make way for the lieutenant!" and turned to see Forrest's body carried between two seamen.

"No," he said, and staggered toward them, forgetting his gun. It was not fair, not fair, and duty disappeared into his anger at Vernon and Wentworth and all the fools who played with men's lives.

Forrest blinked up at him. "Splinter wound," he gasped. "Bloody stupid..."

"Get him below," James barked at the seamen.

"The surgeon's dead!" shouted a man at the bottom of the ladder. "Shots're coming through the hull below!"

"Sir!" called the carpenter. "We've taken twenty shot between wind and water, there's nine feet in the well and rising, and we've no men left to work the pumps."

James gazed around the bloody deck at the despairing faces of his men, all loyal men who were only there because they trusted him. Would Beauclerk have stayed until they were spent to the last man? Was it cowardice, what he was about to do, or was it merely sane?

He called for the signal midshipman. "Signal to flag," he ordered: "*Unequal to the contest.*" Then he returned to his gun.

"Sir!" shouted the boy a few minutes later. "Flag signals to fall off!"

James jogged up to the quarterdeck. "Slip the cable! Set topsails!"

"Her seams are opening!" called the carpenter.

"Blast. Come on, then, get us into those shallows! Run us aground!"

Within moments of setting her sails, the tide helped the ship back onto the sandbar she'd struggled so hard to get over. This time, she crunched to a halt and settled as her timbers pulled apart.

"Lower the boats!"

The crew was so decimated that they could all fit into the barge, the cutter and the pinnace. They rowed with heads down as the fort's parting shots sailed over them, erupting off their bows. James plied his own oar, Forrest lying against him, breathing shallowly.

It took half an hour to row across the harbor, the men exhausted from their toil and their wounds. Once they'd hooked onto the flagship, James hauled himself and Forrest up the side and stumbled onto the deck, Forrest's arm slung over his shoulder, where he found Vernon's stout figure in the crowd. "You have murdered my men, sir," he said, and fell heavily to his knees under Forrest's weight. "You have knowingly—"

"Captain Norrington," said Vernon, "I hereby accuse you of conspiring with the enemy. Master-at-arms, put this man below."

"They shall hear of this in London," James called as two Marines seized him.

"Oh, I expect they will." Vernon smiled. "If you were that ambitious, Norrington, you should have made friends with me. Now you'll likely be shot. Good day."

The Marines pushed James down the ladder into the depths of the ship.

For hours, he sat in the dripping dark. Some part of him understood that it was over, but another part replayed conversations and sifted through evidence and tried to piece together a defense. Strangely, it was Sparrow's voice telling him to give it up and brace himself for what was ahead. Sparrow clung so savagely to life, and yet he accepted his fate with a grace that eluded James. He put his head between his knees and prayed that Sparrow still lived.

The cabin door creaked open, and a lantern blinded him.

A voice spoke out of the glare. "I've gathered a bit more information since last we talked," said Vernon. "We know, for instance, about the false orders you gave to the captains of the bomb-ketches. We know you supplied us with agents to mislead our Infantry columns in the dark. We know that a copy of your signal book turned up in Spanish hands. We know that you aided in Captain Elizagaray's escape. Shall I go on?"

"The goods from the customs-house were meant for England," James said, appalled at how weak he sounded. "The other things—"

"I'm not interested in your excuses," Vernon snarled. "I am already convinced of your guilt. What I want to know is, what else have you given the Spanish?"

"Nothing." James shook his head and swallowed. "I am not a spy."

Behind the light, Vernon sighed. "I was hoping not to have to do this. Seaman?"

A blow out of the dark struck his cheek and knocked his head around. He pulled in a long, stunned breath, and turned back toward the light.

"I have given them nothing," he said.

A blow to the other side of his face cracked his head against the ship's side.

"Why are you persisting, Norrington?" Vernon's face was gradually coalescing into a double image as James's eyes adjusted. "I have plenty of time to devote to this."

"I have not betrayed England," James said.

A burly boatswain's mate materialized out of the dark and smacked him hard across the mouth. His lips tore on his teeth and the taste of blood bloomed in his mouth.

"You have compromised England and sabotaged this expedition," hissed Vernon, "and I will find out how, if only so I may tell my countrymen why I have failed them. Seaman?"

And so it went. He thought, right around the time the man broke his ribs, that he was lucky the Navy wasn't celebrated for imagination. He could endure this violence because he had already endured it. They could not hurt him with surprise.

Vernon left, and in the absence of light, he lost track of time. He seemed to be drifting down a sluggish flood of time as he lay with his face against the rising, falling deck, waiting for the men to return and ask him questions it did him no good to answer.

They came again. "For the last time: what information about British forces did you convey to the Spanish, by yourself or through your agent?"

James looked at the man, who was actually three men drawing apart and closing back into one, and tried to remember the name that went with the face. "Nothing," he said, his swollen lips struggling to form the sounds. "I conveyed nothing."

"Very well. Seaman?"

A blow to the back of his neck sent him down. He knelt, stunned, as the planks under his knees went in and out of focus. Then another blow drove him face-first into the deck. He felt warm trickles down his brow. The pain no longer had a location; it seemed to be everywhere at once, an embracing shell that dulled sound and shut out the world. Except when the world violently intruded.

Abruptly he was looking at the beams. The man whose boot had struck his chin leaned over him. The face blurred and resolved and blurred again.

"Quit this nonsense, Norrington."

He bared his teeth. He was pretty sure he had fewer than he once had.

"The pirate has already confessed. He's given you up—there's no reason to hold out."

This information might have meant something once upon a time. Now, he didn't believe it and he didn't *not* believe it. He just didn't care.

"I have nothing to say." His tongue was swollen in his mouth. "I am innocent."

"As you wish. Seaman?"

A blow to his chest, a flare of agony, and then nothing.

The world was still rocking when he awoke, but he was somewhere different, bigger. The part of the hold accommodated for prisoners, perhaps. His limbs were numb and his chest felt squeezed between two crushing weights, yet for all of that, his mind was strangely clear.

He heard a wet cough. It was familiar.

"Sparrow," he said, lips rubbing weakly in the dirt.

"Aye." Another cough. It was some distance away, echoing in the vast hold.

"I thought you might be dead," said James.

"Nope." The reply would have been cheerful if it hadn't been so strained. "They did their best, but Captain Jack Sparrow endured."

For a minute, he allowed his relief at this one little gift from fortune to warm his aching body.

"You realize," he said, wondering why he was trying to say so many words at once, "that they'll be hoping for us to say something interesting to each other."

"I had worked that out." Sparrow's sarcasm was borne up only by habit.

"So don't." His face hurt, but talking helped somehow.

"Can't even remember what they wanted me to say." Sparrow sounded deeply, killingly tired.

"Me neither. All the better." James coughed. Then his chest spasmed in a flurry of ugly coughs, and by the end he was gagging and spitting, pushing up on his hands and falling, then gasping on his side, tears running down his face.

"Blimey," said Sparrow softly.

"Where the hell are you?" His voice was a gruesome rasp.

"I'm by the side." A rustle. "Gimme a moment." Some weak dragging sounds, interspersed with grunts.

"I don't know about you, Sparrow," said James, "but I think I'm going to die."

"I admit—" Sparrow cursed and the dragging stopped. Then it started again. "I admit it doesn't sound good."

"I'm not looking forward to it." James rolled back onto his stomach. "It's going to hurt, drowning in my own blood."

"Cross that bridge when you come to it, mate." More dragging. "Take it from me: it's never over till it's over. And even then, you never know." His voice was now close.

James reached out and his fingers found metal. Then other fingers found his on the bars.

"There you are," whispered Sparrow in triumph, breathing hard.

"Yes. Unfortunately."

"How's your face? They get your nose? Teeth?"

"I don't really want to know. Can't feel it anyway. You?"

"The nose'll never point north again. The teeth I can live without. Jaw seems all right else I couldn't be talkin'. The rest is all one great bruise."

"I can't see. Can you?"

"Not really."

James sighed. "I suppose you think this is all my fault."

"Well, technically, it is. Strictly speaking. From an objective point of view." A sigh. "But subjectively, it could happen to anyone. Was my poor sense to get mixed up with such bad company."

James laughed, which ended in a cough. "I suppose I deserve that."

"Aye."

The fingers squeezed a little.

"Sparrow, I'm sorry."

"Don't get maudlin. It's Admiral Vernon's doin', not yours."

"I should never have involved you."

"Stop it. I will have no man feel sorry for himself on my behalf. It's unmanning—for both of us."

"Do you think me a fool?"

"Course not. Well, not a big one."

"Sparrow, do you regret it? Knowing me? Surely you never imagined this mess."

"Gov'nor," said Sparrow, "regrets are for men who fear life. Besides," he added, "I'd have counted meself blessed to know you anyway, lovely fool that you are."

James sighed, his chest heavy and burning, his head full of darkness. "Such a fool I am..."

"There, there, darling. It'll work out. Don't go to sleep, now. Commodore!"

James jerked up with a murmur, then lay his head back down. His chest didn't hurt as much.

"Come, now. Did I ever tell you about the time I bought an island for a tub of salt fish? Stay awake, now."

Someone was speaking, but they were like voices underwater. He sank, his lungs heavy and wet, as the last of the light disappeared.

"Gov'nor! Norrington! Stay awake, now...Norrington?"

The fleet had left the noxious coast of the Spanish Main behind to spread their sails across brilliant water laced with torn white spray. Sails stretched from horizon to horizon, all heeling gently as the May breeze drew them toward Jamaica.

Lieutenant Forrest paced the lee side of the quarterdeck while he waited for Captain Gillette to finish below. When Gillette sprang up the companionway with troubled eyes and a drawn face, Forrest recognized the vector of a rumor he very much wanted to intercept.

As it happened, he didn't have to. Gillette came and leaned on the rail beside him.

"Well, sir?" said Forrest. "What have you heard?"

"He's dead," said Gillette.

Forrest shook his head. "They can't do that—even Admiral Vernon can't—"

"They say he hanged himself," Gillette interjected, "rather than give himself up."

"I don't believe it," said Forrest flatly.

"It's only a rumor," Gillette said. "But rumors are often more trustworthy than what the Admiral tells us."

Past the rail, the mottled green and sapphire water slid into the shadows of the sails. Neither man could bring himself to speak.

There is a certain peace in death, no matter how violent the end. Nothing matters; all is one. And the beds are very, very comfortable.

Someone was saying his name, repeatedly. It was annoying.

"...James! Do you know where you are?"

He blinked. Panes of yellow light surrounded him, and his body was borne up on an aether-soft cloud. He could smell coffee. "In a bed, in a room?" He blinked again. "How the hell should I know?"

"Thank God." A blurry pink shape resolved into Governor Swann. "How do you feel?"

"Like I've been beaten," said James.

"Heavens." Swann mopped his brow. "We had no hope for you. You were bleeding in your lungs, and the fever...you were raving..."

"Oh God." He thought of Sparrow. "What did I say?"

"You were giving orders, mostly. Run out the guns! Fire on the uproll!"

Thank God. "Where is Sparrow?"

"Oh, dear." Swann winced. "I'm afraid he was executed earlier this morning."

Cold washed over him.

"I'm sorry," Swann was saying, "I know he would have been a valuable witness, but I thought it best to let the Admiral have his way...James, what are you doing?"

He had tumbled out of bed and was crawling on the cold floor to find his clothes. His chest was on fire and he missed the embracing comfort of the bed, but he needed his clothes. His breeches and stockings were folded over a chair. He seized them and pulled them on.

Swann hovered behind him. "You mustn't get up, James, you're still in a great deal of danger."

"You are free to detain me with force," he snapped, hunting for a waistcoat. There was none to be found. Nor were there shoes. He headed for the door in his shirt and smallclothes.

Swann ran to keep up, but didn't stay him. "If you wish to speak to the Admiral about this, you can

wait until you've healed a bit...James, I don't see what you hope to accomplish by this...good heavens, you're not even dressed!"

James burst out the front door of the mansion with the Governor trailing after him. "Take this, at least!" Swann cried, and threw his coat over James's shoulders.

It was a long walk to the fort, and by the time he got there, he was limping, the feet of his stockings stained with blood. He pushed past the guards at the entrance and marched out onto the parade ground, where the scaffold still stood.

Upon which several men were still standing. One of whom was Sparrow.

"Governor!" James cried. "Halt that execution at once."

"I'm really not certain whether..."

"Governor Swann!" James snarled. "Make—them—stop!"

"Admiral Vernon," called Swann, "this execution has been stayed. I'm turning the matter over to the Vice-Admiralty court. You shall have it in writing this afternoon. In the meantime, please return the prisoner to his cell."

Sparrow's face was a bruised mess, but he was upright. He was looking at James with hungry joy. James drank in the sight of him for a moment before staggering against Swann, hands tingling and ears roaring. When he found Sparrow's eyes again, they were full of concern.

"You must make them release him," James said, steadying himself on Swann's shoulder.

"Are you mad?" Swann cried. "He is accused of spying, not to mention the crimes of which he's already been sentenced to hang for—"

"He's not a spy," James said. "Well, he is, but for us—me. He gave us soundings for Cartagena's inner harbor—that's why Vernon wants us silenced, he refused to use them—"

"All right, all right. Can you prove any of this?"

"I—don't know, I—"

"Never mind. Come on, then, Sparrow's safe for now. Back to bed with you..."

"Vernon!" James shouted, sagging into the arms of two Marines. "I'll have satisfaction." Then he fainted properly.

When he woke in the early evening, Elizabeth was sitting beside his bed. He couldn't see her face—the lavender twilight behind her head cast her features in darkness. But he got the feeling she was smiling.

He allowed her to pour a few spoonfuls of broth down his throat before sinking back into his pillow. "Listen to me carefully," he said.

She bent forward, taking his hand.

"Through your father's grace, our mutual friend has been granted a hearing. He'll likely be moved from Fort Charles to Bridewell Prison to await his trial, which will be in no more than a week." He gazed at her. "I believe we understand one another?"

She nodded.

James saw quite a bit of Elizabeth and her father over the next few days. Even Turner came to visit.

"I underestimated you," said Turner awkwardly, perched on a stool.

"It seems I am forever to be judged on the basis of my attitude toward Sparrow," James muttered. He struggled with the pillow at his back and gave up in frustration. "All of you must be aware that I am a man in my own right? With wholly un-Sparrow-related thoughts and opinions?"

Turner looked guilty. "I didn't mean it unkindly, Commodore."

"And I'm not a commodore any longer. For heaven's sake, get it right." James shifted around irritably. "I apologize, Mr. Turner. I am simply tired of looking at the pattern on those curtains."

"You know," said Turner, sensing a need for his own apology, "I've arranged escapes before."

James smiled. "Let's hope this one is more successful than the last."

Downstairs, two Marines stopped them.

"Sorry, Commodore," said the fat one. "Admiral's orders."

"Oh, but he's given the Governor his parole," said Turner. "He's free to go where he likes as long as he doesn't leave town."

"Ah, but it's the Admiral what says he's got to stay put," said the skinny one.

The fat one shook his head. "Governor trumps Admiral, I'd think."

The skinny one looked shocked. "You've got it backwards. Admiral definitely trumps Governor."

"You're a pillock," said the fat one.

"We'll be going, then," said Turner, leading James out the door.

"Right, then." The skinny Marine spun around. "Oi!"

Turner helped James back to his little townhouse, where he'd not set foot in more than four months. His steward and valet greeted him and helped him upstairs.

Once the servants had left them alone, Turner said, "They're moving Jack on Thursday."

James nodded. Nothing else needed to be said.

A few days later, Gillette brought him the news of Sparrow's escape. His breathing, which still hadn't recovered, grew a little easier.

7 June, 1741

In its finer moments, naval justice was capable of great humanity, but more often, it was a primitive affair. The average sea-officer sitting on a court-martial was at home in the teeth of a Channel gale but knew next to nothing of the law. The only man in the room required to know anything at all was the Deputy Judge Advocate, who in this case was James's old secretary, Mr. Sandys—a man whose duties around Port Royal included everything from diplomacy to masonry

and barbering. He was even known to extract the occasional tooth. His legal expertise, alas, was on par with his dentistry—akin to a pair of tongs, a bottle of brandy and three seamen beating on copper pots in the patient's ear. If the men judging James were intelligent and unbiased, this would serve well enough, like most naval improvisation at sea. If they weren't, he was lost.

At the head of the table beneath the stern windows of the *Princess Caroline's* stateroom, Rear-Admiral Ogle frowned in shadow against the brilliant morning light, while the senior captains of the squadron sat rigidly beside him, mopping their foreheads in the June heat. From the prosecutor's seat, Vernon's hot scowl pressed on James. Nearby, Sandys rustled his papers as he read out the warrants, charges, and orders for assembling the court, then administered the oath, over and over, that always ended in "so help you God."

James's neck prickled with sweat. For the last fortnight, he had thought of nothing but his defense, and now that the day had arrived, he had remarkably little to show for it. Without Sparrow to corroborate his story, he could not prove his innocence; the best he could hope to do was establish a reasonable doubt. All depended on his judges, and how ready they were to be convinced.

The cabin filled with shuffles and murmurs as all of the witnesses except the first were ushered out, and then Vernon was on his feet, addressing Captain Gillette.

"...and when the defendant informed you of this Spanish convoy he intended to ambush in the Mona Passage, did he tell you how he'd learned of it?"

Gillette's pale brows scrunched as he fixed his eyes somewhere past Vernon. "He said he'd received intelligence from an—an undisclosable source."

"And tell me," said Vernon, narrowing his eyes, "were there any incidents once the Spanish prizes had been secured, incidents that might have caused some of the valuables on those prizes to go missing?"

"Well"—Gillette looked suddenly ill—"there was an accident when we were unloading the prize that had run aground—a boom broke as we were lowering a chest of silver into a boat..."

"Yes? And?"

Gillette sighed. "I suggested that we attempt to salvage it, but Captain Norrington was concerned about making the rendezvous with the squadron, and so we left it."

"Yes." Vernon turned to the court. "He left it as payment for his pirate accomplice. He violated the seventh Article of War and despoiled a prize before it could be condemned, depriving the King of his rightful share."

"Admiral," said Sandys testily, "these are not among the charges you have brought against the prisoner."

Vernon nodded. "I may not be able to prove that the defendant intended that silver for his friend. The evidence in this matter, taken in isolation, is far too thin." He spread his arms in a self-conscious rhetorical gesture. "I mean instead to illustrate a pattern of circumstantial facts that can only be explained one way: by the accused's treachery."

At the head of the table, Ogle nodded. "Captain Norrington, have you any questions for Captain Gillette that might help clarify your actions in this matter?"

James looked down. "I do not."

Vernon turned his bland smile on the court. "Very well. Mr. Sandys, the next witness, if you please..."

If Gillette had seemed nervous, Forrest looked downright mutinous as he took his seat, his dark upper lip gleaming with sweat, his thick brows knotted together.

"...And where did Captain Norrington go on these occasions? Did he tell you?"

"He said he feared for the life of a man who had been acting as his spy, sir, and he'd gone to aid him."

"Quite. How long was he gone, would you say?"

"I don't rightly recall."

"Think, Mr. Forrest."

The court listened while Vernon extracted the details of those last awful days at Cartagena, including Don Pedro's mysterious escape. Once again, James found himself with no questions for Forrest when his chance for cross-examination came. He could not deny that Sparrow had worked for him. All he could do was repeat that he had not betrayed England; he could offer no positive proof.

Once Forrest had left the cabin, Ogle himself made his way to the witness's chair and allowed Sandys to swear him in.

"Were you aware that Captain Norrington was working with a secret source?" asked Vernon.

"I was," said Ogle, "but this is rather common. In the West Indies, we often consult pirates and other questionable characters with an intimate knowledge of the area. You yourself gave Captain Norrington permission to use an agent without identifying the man, and continued to allow it. Admiral"—he leaned forward—"the accused is not on trial for using secret sources or even for engaging the services of a pirate. He is on trial for knowingly conveying false intelligence."

Vernon pursed his lips. "Just so. Rear-Admiral, do you recall the letter that the prisoner delivered to us on the eve of our departure for Cartagena, supposedly from Don Francisco Martinez de Retez, regarding the Marquis d'Antin's ailing fleet?"

"I do."

"Well, I've shown it to several diplomats, whose sworn affidavits I can produce, who all agree that Don Francisco was imprisoned in Spain at the time this letter was written. It is, therefore, a fake."

James shut his eyes. Of course—Sparrow had wanted the British to go to Havana so badly. Damn and blast the man.

"Of course," Vernon continued, "the contents of the letter turned out to be true. Tell me, what would the consequences have been they been false?"

"Well," Ogle shrugged, "had the letter falsely told us the French were gone and we had believed it without verifying it, then it would have meant disaster for the fleet. We'd have been caught between two fleets and utterly annihilated, and Jamaica lost."

"Yet Captain Norrington happily passed on this unreliable piece of intelligence knowing full well the consequences if it were wrong."

"Like I said, we'd never have trusted it without corroborating—"

"Yes, yes. But consider the pattern here. He knew he was dealing with a wicked, self-interested criminal and yet took the man's word at face value. The soundings of the inner harbor—were they correct?"

"Difficult to say," said Ogle. "The ship ran aground, certainly, but it was under heavy fire and other mitigating factors—"

"The ship ran aground." Vernon turned a glare on the court. "The precise scenario against which soundings are meant to guard. Gentlemen, I think we can safely assume the soundings were false, just like that letter."

"But sir," said one of the younger post-captains on the court, "surely you must prove to us that Captain Norrington *knowingly* deceived you."

"There is a fine line between knowing deception and criminal negligence. They amount to the same because they result in the same."

The young captain nodded and looked down.

"The prosecution calls Lieutenant Lowther," said Sandys.

"Mr. Lowther," Vernon said, "tell us what you know of Jack Sparrow."

The tale that Lowther spun was worthy of Sparrow himself. A lifelong servant of the King of Spain, was Sparrow, and a crusader for the Catholic faith. He'd been using James from the start, apparently, and together they'd conspired with Don Blas to destroy the English fleet. No one who had spent more than five minutes around Sparrow would have believed it, of course; to think of Sparrow owing allegiance to any nation was absurd. But none of the men on the court knew that. And once again, James could prove nothing.

It was time to present his defense. "Honorable sirs," he said, "I do not deny that I collaborated with Jack Sparrow. But I submit to you that I did so for England's benefit; that Sparrow's activities served England and not Spain; and that Mr. Lowther has told these lies to conceal his own treachery." With a feeling of creeping futility, he told his version of events—leaving out the manner in which he and Sparrow had first come to cooperate, but detailing the rest, down to their disastrous plan to loot the customs-house.

"Do you have any means of proving this?" asked Ogle. "Is there anyone at all who can confirm it?"

"No," James admitted, "but I hope the court will observe that Lieutenant Lowther's story is equally unsupported—"

"Yet a great deal more plausible," said Vernon. "Really, Norrington, you might as well confess if you can give no evidence apart from your word."

The court watched him serenely, and for one mad moment, he nearly gave in—a senseless impulse toward suicide like the one he'd once felt looking over a precipice into the sea. Vernon's hostile glare bore into him, and the impulse passed. "I shall do nothing of the sort," he said.

"Rear-Admiral Ogle!" cried a voice from the back of the cabin. "Make way, please. I bring a witness for the defense."

The crowd parted and Governor Swann appeared, grey curls flying as he dragged Jack Sparrow

forward by the wrist.

James stopped himself from crying out. All of their scheming to get Sparrow free, it had all been for nothing; the despair he hadn't felt when they'd first been arrested came crashing down now. Had Sparrow come here willingly? Surely he was too clever for that. Swann had caught him somehow, damn the well-intentioned old fool.

"Governor," said Vernon coldly, regarding Sparrow as though he were a bit of grease staining his cuff, "you cannot expect us to accept the testimony of such an infamous witness. We have standards, you know. I challenge this man's credibility, *propter delictum*."

Sparrow mouthed the words *propter delictum* slowly to himself, but Swann was busy producing a document from his coat pocket. "As the King's representative in these colonies, I have issued Captain Sparrow a full pardon," he said, sliding the paper under Mr. Sandys's nose. "His criminal status can no longer exclude him."

Ogle's brow had darkened. "Governor, we must discuss the legality of this turn of events," he growled. "A man's life hangs in the balance here; I will permit no ambiguities. Clear the court, if you please."

The sweltering stateroom emptied its spectators, witnesses and prisoner onto the main deck. Once free, the crowd burst into excited chatter. James leaned against the rail with the master-at-arms hovering close by and ignored it, letting the breeze cool his sweating neck. Across the deck, Sparrow stuck close to the Governor and the piece of paper that was all that stood between him and the instant carriage of justice. There was no way they could speak to each other. James settled for catching his eye and asked silently, *how?*

Sparrow replied with a complicated sequence of charades—arm-waving, hand-flapping, a sort of truncated hornpipe—and mouthed what appeared to be *Elizabeth*. (James doubted he was saying *a list of pets* or *a lizard bed*, but with Sparrow, you could never discount anything.) James returned his grin wearily. So that wonderful woman and her wonderful father had conspired, this time on his behalf. His spirits lifted.

A clerk emerged from the stateroom to announce that the court would resume. Inside, Ogle wiped his brow and tugged his wilting cravat. "The testimony of the pirate Jack Sparrow will be admitted," he said with a dubious sigh. "Captain Norrington? Proceed."

James took a breath and met Sparrow's eyes. Even now, with the evidence before him, he could barely believe it. Sparrow had returned—not for himself, not for treasure or to get back his precious ship, but for James. It was against all reason, but here it was. Sparrow's black eyes glittered as he waited patiently for James to begin.

"Captain Sparrow," said James, his mouth suddenly dry, "please tell the court how our association first began."

"Well, your honors," said Sparrow, "we were enemies at first, I'll admit. But the Commodore wanted to fight the Spanish, and to do it, he needed something he didn't possess: dishonesty..."

And so Sparrow narrated the whole tale from beginning to end, give or take a few details (excluding, mercifully, his escape from Portobello) and for once—for one strange moment in an otherwise dishonest life—the majority of it was true.

"Well," said Ogle at last, "it appears we are at an impasse. We have heard two matching versions of your story, Captain Norrington, but we have still not got at the core of the question: whether or

not the intelligence you conveyed was false. Everything depends on the veracity of those harbor soundings, it would seem. Can either you or Admiral Vernon produce a single scrap of concrete evidence on the matter?"

"I believe I can," said James, feeling calm for the first time all day. "If you please, gentlemen, I call Captain Rentone to witness."

Rentone sweated and fidgeted before the court, looking terribly young and lost. "I could make no sense of that chart at the time," he admitted in reply to James's query. "You said you weren't sure of it yourself. But later you told me you were convinced it had come from an honest source."

"Ah," said Vernon nastily, "so the welfare of the fleet depends entirely on whether Captain Norrington trusts his pirate friend not. Don't you see? We cannot be subject to the whims of one man's judgment!"

"Silence, please," said Ogle. "Continue, Captain Rentone."

The young man cast a miserable glance toward Vernon as he said, "I owe everything to the Admiral, and I may very well be driving myself aground here. But I also know that Captain Norrington did nothing wrong. Sirs, if you'll permit me"—he opened a portfolio and took out a sheaf of papers—"I consulted the accounts of Baron de Pointis's attack on Cartagena in '97, and together with testimony from Spanish deserters and my own observation of the *Galicia*'s final voyage, I've managed to reconstruct this survey of the harbor bottom..."

The court's eyebrows climbed to their wigs. While Rentone spoke, his voice growing more confident as he engrossed himself in hydrography, James thought of Sparrow. As soon as the court had dismissed him, he had fled from the cabin with one last wink for James, and hopefully by now, he was far away. A Navy flagship was no place for him, protected by nothing but a pardon of dubious legitimacy. James wondered with a stab if he would ever see Sparrow again.

The sun dropped toward the sea, and at last the court cleared for deliberation. In a small, stuffy cabin, James sat with his head leaned on his hand, trying to rid his mind of all thoughts. It was out of his control now; but time passed with excruciating slowness. Finally he was called, and he stepped back into the stateroom where the court waited for him solemnly, heads covered. His sword lay before them on the table—the hilt toward him. Rear-Admiral Ogle began to speak.

"...and having maturely and deliberately considered the whole, the court is of opinion that the charge of spying and conveying false intelligence against Captain James Norrington is not proved." Ogle looked up. "We do, however, formally reprimand you for your failure to disclose your source of intelligence. Your choice of Jack Sparrow was foolish in the extreme, but we could have forgiven it if you had confided in your commanding officer. That you did not do so because you knew the Admiral would object is what deserves our censure." Ogle peered sternly over his papers. "You have a bright career to look forward to, Captain Norrington, but it is dimmed by what you have done. You shall have to work hard to remove this tarnish. You'd best get started. Well," he added, clearing his throat, "now that that's taken care of—" He passed James a letter. "Here are your orders."

James accepted them with a trembling hand. The words were almost too blurred to read, but he made out one, at least: *Dauntless*.

He buckled on his sword as the court and audience filed out. Vernon remained behind, radiating malignancy, and then Gillette was at James's side. "Well, Admiral?" he said, taking James's arm. "The court has spoken. It's not too late for an apology."

"Forget it," growled Vernon.

"Very well, then. Plumb Point, tomorrow at dawn. Everything is arranged."

Above where the men held the stamping horses, where Gillette watched white-faced and Ogle towered motionless as a shadow, the mountains of Jamaica rose into the haze, from their green feet to their cloudy blue heads. To James's right was nothing but the gleaming sapphire of the Caribbean. His feet sank in the wet sand.

"Ten paces!" shouted Ogle. "One...two..."

As James walked, his anger drained out of him, filling his footprints. He had dreamed so often of killing Vernon, but now it seemed like a tremendous waste of both their lives—for his own would certainly be over as well should he put a bullet in the Admiral's breast. Vernon had controlled him enough in life—he couldn't allow the man to haunt him in death as well. Five paces, six... uncertainty gripped him, and uncertainty in a duel was deadly. He had three more paces to decide.

"Fire!" cried Ogle, and James spun around with pistol raised. The muzzle fell on Vernon, whose bulk made a broad target, and James held it there for moment before sliding it to the left.

As he squeezed the trigger, his side burst into splinters of pain, and he staggered and went to his knees. At the other end of the beach, Vernon bent over clutching his hand. James pitched forward, clutching his side, and then Gillette's arms were around him. The following minutes were full of sound without sight, abrupt changes of altitude, hoof beats, and raised voices. When he finally lifted his eyelids, a doctor sat at his bedside.

"Good news...ribs...ball bounced right off, by Jove...lucky chap..."

The doctor opened James's mouth and placed a few drops on his tongue, then went away. James drifted down a warm indigo hour, the pain diminished to a tickle, his body numb and his mind unmoored. The sheets were cool, the air was sweet. His eyes closed. Something musical, like little bells, made him smile.

"I do not understand you," said a voice. "We go to all that trouble to preserve your life, an' you do your best to toss it away again."

His smile widened. "Sparrow."

The bed lurched under the man's weight. Then cool fingers touched his forehead. "Is that it, then? Is the whole bloody rotten business well an' truly done with?"

"I think so." James opened his eyes to find the beloved face, which was less cross than the voice had led him to expect. "Though Vernon will do his best to destroy me in other ways."

"I'd better not have to do this again," sniffed Sparrow. "I'm not built for bedside vigils. They do not display me to my best advantage."

"Yes, they do." James reached out to find Sparrow's hand. "Thank you for returning. I think they would have convicted me without your testimony."

Lips touched James's temple. "I like you like this, mate. We should get you all whacked up on laudanum more often. Though I'm told it's no great aid to performance..."

"I should think not. I can't feel a thing." James rolled his head so that it fit beneath Sparrow's chin.

"How long will you stay?"

"Well—" Sparrow squirmed. "My ship's still out there. Your fleet leaves for Cuba soon an' I plan to be in attendance."

"I shall miss you," said James sleepily, "but you deserve to have her back."

"Here, now," said Sparrow with a smile, "surely you'll join your comrades when you're able."

"I'm leaving for the Mediterranean," James sighed. "Presuming I recover, which the doctor says I shall, I can expect to join Mathews in the Toulon blockade."

"Can you, now." Sparrow stiffened. "You'll be based in Port Mahon, aye? Nice weather there. Pretty girls. Birthplace of mayonnaise, you know."

"Sparrow..."

There was a sigh. "It's a wide ocean, Gov'nor. But as long as you and I are both free upon it, it needn't stand between us."

James smiled. "You have been known to do the impossible."

A kiss touched James's mouth. "It is, in fact, my specialty."

16 July, 1741

James had regained his *Dauntless*, but lost his first lieutenant, which diluted his joy even though the loss was for the best of reasons—Forrest had advanced to his own command. James's new first was old and irritable and they had already quarreled once—if a sharp retort and a threat followed by silence could be considered a quarrel. James left him preparing the *Dauntless* for sea while he put his affairs in order. His solicitor would sell his house, and the rest of his assets were in London, so it was a short list of errands. He bid an affectionate farewell to the Governor, who had done no less than save his life, and then prepared for his final visit to Elizabeth. He wasn't certain he could say goodbye to her without making a fool of himself, so he approached her home with trepidation.

"I thought you'd be glad to get out of the Caribbean," she teased, settling them both on the garden bench. "You're always complaining about how uncivilized it is here."

"One may form sentimental attachments even to the most odious of circumstances," he replied, smiling. "If I didn't share that tendency, why, I'd never have become a sailor."

Elizabeth clasped his arm. "I wish you didn't have to go."

He smiled tightly, unable to reply.

"I don't suppose you—"

"I trust you've not heard—"

They stared at each other. Then Elizabeth said, "You've had no word from Jack, then?"

He laughed. "And I take it he's sent none to you."

"That doesn't mean much. It's out of sight, out of mind for Jack—I doubt he ever thinks of either of us."

She didn't know the full extent of James's attachment to Sparrow, but her words made his heart clench anyway.

"James—" Elizabeth turned to him. "I think you're under a false impression." She bowed her head. "I think you believe that all my respect for you depended on Jack—how you let him escape, how you became his friend. I want you to know it's not true."

He couldn't look at her. "Your attitude toward me certainly seemed to change once I—"

"James." She clutched his hand. "You've always had my affection and respect. Jack never had anything to do with it."

He said goodbye and excused himself quickly. Drawing deep breaths and wiping his eyes as he walked toward the waterfront, he let the little town of Port Royal fall away, let his memories of it recede into their proper distance, and set his mind on his empty blue destination.

On the quay, his melancholy was interrupted by a familiar figure climbing out of a barge.

"Captain Rentone!" James hurried forward to shake the man's hand. "My word—what's the matter?"

"Oh, sir." Rentone looked ready to burst into tears. "I am ruined, ruined."

"Come now." James took him by the shoulder. "What's this about, then?"

"You see—" Rentone looked heavenward. "I took a prize—but I lost it!"

"Lost it? How?"

"We were cruising off Santiago de Cuba, and out comes a funny sort of antique Spanish bark with a black hull."

James's heart paused.

"We took her quite easily," Rentone continued. "She struck without much of a fight, being so outgunned. I sent a prize-crew across, and we turned our heads toward Port Royal—but in the morning, why, she was gone! I thought maybe her crew had overpowered ours—but later, we ran across both crews bobbing along in boats. None of them could make head or tail of what happened."

James's heart swelled. "I wouldn't worry, Rentone," he said. "You've merely joined an elite brotherhood, I'm afraid."

Rentone gazed at him miserably. "What's that?"

"Men who have lost a ship to Captain Jack Sparrow."

"Oh." The young man hung his head. After a moment, he smiled. "I see."

Once he'd said farewell to Rentone, James headed for his ship. He didn't look back at Port Royal, where for a brief time he'd ruled with near omnipotence, back when he'd been slightly less wise. The shadow of the *Dauntless* engulfed his barge, and then he was piped aboard, his officers saluting him, the ship's company all at attention. As he saluted the quarterdeck and then climbed to his sovereign seat on the weather side, the people gave him three cheers, then returned to the organized chaos of fitting out for sea.

With Admiral Mathews's orders in his breast pocket, James stroked the familiar rail and looked out over the deck crawling with busy men and animals—hens starting at the shriek of a fife, boys running between the legs of cows, lieutenants and young gentlemen strutting and shouting. It felt strange to be here while so many others were not—he thought of Beauclerk with the old sharp stab—but he had his orders and he felt no hesitation. He'd forgotten what peace there could be in service, when it was freely given.

The breeze brought him a great noseful of the sea, that cold, brackish rot that permeated all his most important memories. He closed his eyes. The next land they'd touch would be the Azores, and then Minorca, two months away. The tide was slack; it was time to weigh anchor.

As the topsails filled and the ship stood out for open sea, he put behind him the place that had been his home for a decade. He was not a man meant to have a home. For him, the chase had no end. But out there, another man was fleeing while he was chasing, and occasionally their wakes might cross, tracing the figure of an embrace on the sea. It was enough.

END

Chapter End Notes

A translation of what Jack says in Spanish: "You have me confused with some other guy. Get your hands off me, you sons of bitches!"

Historical Notes: Throughout the story, Norrington alternately plays the roles of two historical Navy captains: Commodore Charles Brown and Captain Charles Knowles. Other canon characters stand in for historical figures as well: Gillette for Captains Digby Dent and Edward Boscawen, and Governor Swann for Governor Trelawney. Norrington's father is based on an Army engineer named Joseph Bennet. The other major characters are all real people. Jack Sparrow, of course, has no historical precedent whatsoever. I do worry, in fictionalizing these events, that I misrepresented certain figures, most notably Admiral Vernon, who filled the necessary role of villain. I remain convinced, however, that my portrayal errs only by degree. Vernon was an asshole—just not quite as much of one as I make him out to be. Lowther, too, was misrepresented; he was not a spy, as far as I know (although there was a spy whom they called "El Paisano"). Other changes I made to the historical narrative include: Don Pedro Elizagaray. He was a real person, but I made up his conspiracy with Lowther (who, as I said, wasn't actually a spy) and basically everything else about him. The English didn't bring him to Cartagena either.

All of the other pirates. I considered using famous pirates for Jack's allies, but they needed to be unimpressive by historical standards, and there were not a lot of big-name pirate operating in the Caribbean by then anyway.

Uniforms. Neither the British nor the Spanish Navy had uniforms yet in 1739.

Lord Aubrey's career. The fight with the Turks never happened, and in fact he commanded the Garland in the Mediterranean from 1733-4, at a time when Norrington would already have been in the West Indies.

The 1739 attack on the treasure fleet. Never happened, as far as I know.

Little details about all the battles. I compressed time a lot, and Norrington leads attacks that his historical counterparts didn't. Because he's the hero, of course.

Norrington's capture of the Spanish ships in the Mona Passage. Totally made up. Lord

Aubrey did run into Knowles at sea, though.

The ball isn't based on a historical ball. There may have been one, but I don't know anything about it.

Norrington as reluctant go-between in the fight between Vernon and Wentworth.

Knowles, Norrington's historical counterpart, was totally on Vernon's side.

The letters sewn into the British ensign. That actually happened several months later in Cuba.

The sneaking-water-to-the-army intrigue. Didn't happen. As I said, Knowles was on Vernon's side the whole time.

Don Blas booby-trapping Castillo Grande. Never happened.

Don Sebastian wanting to move the goods out of the customs-house. Didn't happen.

The whole customs-house conspiracy and its consequences. Jack's capture,

Norrington's accusation as a spy, their imprisonment and interrogation, the court-martial...nothing like that ever happened. The Galicia's suicide mission to fire on the city, though, did.

And Rentone never captured the Black Pearl, obviously.

There were lots of other little things I changed, but these are most of the major ones.

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